

In truth, it all began with what most thought to be an end. The Dark Lord had fallen and Lily and James Potter were dead, but we all know, deep down, that something of the dark always remains, just as something of the deceased couple lingered on through their one year old child. All over the world witches and wizards rejoiced in the absence of their previous sense of impending doom, raising their glasses in toast to the boy who lived- Harry Potter.

There were some, however, for whom the night brought no reason for rejoicing. A few were those close to the Potters, a precious few who mourned their deaths instead of excepting them as a necessary sacrifice. Most, however, were not. Those who thought this wave of trouble to be over were much mistaken. The servants of Lord Voldemort do not easily admit defeat.

It was the rather chilling morning of November 1st, the day after the demise of the Potters that Peter Pettigrew was awakened by tapping on his window. He stumbled sleepily to his feet. It was an owl carrying the days issue of the wizarding newspaper, the Daily Prophet. He scanned briefly over the front page article, "You-Know-Who Defeated at Godric's Hollow," which was accompanied by a picture of a baby with wide emerald eyes, messy black baby curls. It might have almost been the sort of dresser top baby photo that could be found in most homes, but on closer examination, one would notice the flames in the background, as the ruined house burned, and the limp hand of a corpse that could be seen in the corner of the photo. A few drops of blood trickled down from a lightning-shaped cut on his forehead. He was screaming.

Peter Pettigrew finished scanning the article with a look of vague disgust on his face. He flipped through the pages of the newspaper impatiently until something caught his interest.

### **Black Arrested for Mass Murder**

Sirius Black was arrested yesterday night for the murder of 12 muggles with a single curse, and the attempted murder of Peter Pettigrew, who barely managed to get

out of the way in time. Aurors arrived in time to prevent further damage. Shell shocked witnesses report "Black was *laughing*." The situation is being covered by the ministry, including the large amount of memory modification needed. Black, who is said to have been You-Know-Who's second in command, and is beyond doubt a sadistic madman, is safely in Azkaban.

It was fairly brief, and would be of far less interest to most than the attack on Godric's Hollow, but Mr. Peter Pettigrew seemed to find it quite satisfying, for, as he read, a slow smirk spread across his face.

Within two weeks, he had persuaded Albus Dumbledore to tell him the complete prophesy. Shortly after the Deatheaters dropped their plan to attack the Longbottoms in favor of a new plan. Six years later, the wards protecting Number 4, Privet Drive, collapsed.

-----  
-----

*Number 4, Privet Drive, Surrey,*

Nearly six years had passed since the Dursleys had awoken to find their nephew on the front step, but Privet Drive had hardly change at all. The sun rose each morning over the same tidy front gardens, and even the house at number 4 Privet Drive was almost exactly the same as on that fateful night when the youngest Potter was left on it's door step. Indeed, only the photographs on the mantel piece really showed how much time had passed. Six years ago there had been lots of pictures of what looked like a large pink beach ball wearing different colored bonnets- but Dudley Dursley was no longer a baby(in appearance, at least), and now the photographs showed a large blond boy riding his first bicycle, climbing on the school bus for his first day of kindergarten, on a carousel at the fair, playing a

computer game with his father, being hugged and kissed by his mother. There was no sign that another boy lived in the house.

The Dursleys had always been proud to say they were perfectly normal, thank-you-very-much. Despite that, however, they had a secret, and their greatest fear was that someone would discover it. They didn't think they could bear it if someone found out about the Potters. Mrs. Potter had been Mrs. Dursleys sister, but for years before Lily's death, as well as in the years that followed, Mrs. Dursley liked to talk as if she didn't have a sister, because her sister and her good-for-nothing husband had been as unDursleyish as it was possible to be. Now there was only one Potter left, and as the last remaining link to their most deeply guarded secret, they could never treat him like a normal person. Harry Potter was still there, of course, and it was for that reason Mrs. Petunia Dursley could never forget her sister, not with the emerald eyes that lingered on in the boy. He was currently curled up in the cupboard under the stairs, but not for long. Each morning he was awoken by his aunt screaming for him to get up and make breakfast. But it was still far from morning; in fact, it was the middle of the night. The cupboard door swung open, and his Aunt's arms shook him roughly awake.

"Listen carefully boy. The house is under attack. When they've gone upstairs, you must run as fast as you can, away from here, and don't look back." The door closed. He could hear himself breathing, a little faster than normal, and hear the pounding of the blood in his ears; his heartbeat, beating faster and faster, as if counting down to the arrival of something that could not be coming at all. There was a muffled creak as the front door opened, and footsteps as the intruders walked through the hall, and headed up the stairs. Once the footsteps had faded enough that Harry knew that they were out of sight, probably almost to the top of the stairs, he gently slid open the door and crept out of the cupboard, blood still pounding in his ears.

-----  
-----

She could hear the footsteps on the staircase, growing louder, closer, not knowing what to expect, or entirely why she'd done it. Perhaps it was because he was far too young to die, no matter how freakish, or

because she'd never done anything else for him. Perhaps it was the knowledge of how much Lily had cared, and been willing to sacrifice for the boy. Maybe it was that she finally had to face the reality of magic instead of the fairy tale; the fact that it was complex, and as much as it had hurt her to be left behind, Lily had had to deal with hardships as well. Or perhaps, it was because she could not bare to see the fear and pain and sorrow that she knew would be reflected in those emerald eyes, to know how Lily's eyes would have looked in her last moments, and to have those last moments reflected in the eternally haunting green orbs. She remained quiet, a strange feeling of emptiness overwhelming her, as she tried to convince herself that it would not be her death that would grant him the last moments he needed to escape. As the footsteps reached the top of the stairs, she glanced out the window. Smiling grimly, she pulled the curtains shut, then walked to the top of the stairs to meet them.

-----  
-----

As soon as he made it outside, the emerald eyed boy broke into a run, as fast as he could. Anyone who glanced out the window would have seen the small figure of a terrified seven year old child dashing across the lawn away from the house, never looking back; not as the air was filled with screams, or when the house that was the essence of everything he had known as far back as he could remember erupted in flames. He just kept running, breathing heavily, heart pounding, their screams echoing in his ears as they would later echo in his nightmares.

-----  
-----

Harry didn't stop until he was well away from Privet Drive. He finally collapsed on the ground, completely out of breath, and lay prone and frightened where he fell. He waited for something to happen, sure that something would grab him at any moment, but far too out of breath to move. He listened carefully, but all that could be heard was bird calls, and cars in the distance. There was a slight rustle. He twisted round to see what menace had arrived... it was a squirrel,

scurrying hurriedly up a tree. Several minutes later, glancing around warily, he slowly pushed himself onto his feet.

He had arrived on the edge of a neighborhood several miles from his former home. As he crept forward, he could see that it was a bit larger, and shabbier than the area from which he had just fled. The lawns lacked the impeccably neat and orderly quality of Privet Drive, and the houses varied in architecture and style. Some were coated in bright fresh paint, some faded or peeling, some in stone or brick. Some had children's playthings scattered here and there, others slightly overgrown. It was fairly quiet here, only a few hours before dawn, but it seemed oddly comforting in the dim lamp light, if only because of how very different it was.

Unsure of what to do next, he walked hurriedly down the sidewalk, which was slightly cracked in places, where the grass sprang through. He kept on quietly, a small figure hugging to the shadows where he might blend in, which his dark hair and faded clothes made a simple task. The houses, in all their variety, mostly had all the lights off, though there were a few exceptions here and there, as most late nighters would fall asleep a few hours before dawn, and most other people weren't awake yet, though some rooms with the lights out probably did contain people who were awake and active. He didn't pause until he reached a small playground, where he came to a sudden halt. It was a logical spot for a child to pause, I suppose, being something familiar, and for Harry, being a symbol of something he could never fully have: a childhood. He had the helplessness, the fear, the loneliness, the pain that all children go through, as much as adults hate to admit it, but not the happiness, or protection, or comfort. He could never be the carefree child playing and laughing; he never had been. And I think, had anyone been watching, it would have been this image that would have lingered in their minds; the image of a scrawny boy in faded clothes rocking slowly back and forth, small hands clutching the chains of the swing on which he sat, silently, head tilted forwards, raven locks flopped downwards, emerald eyes staring wordlessly at the ground.

By the time Harry awoke the next day, the sun was well above the horizon. He had been rather lucky, all in all. Since it was a week day, and in early fall, no one had arrived at the playground before he woke up. Though it was far louder now, he was mildly surprised he hadn't awoken because of the traffic. He uncurled from inside the plastic tunnel where he'd slept, and walked cautiously down the street. He felt rather hungry, but he wasn't sure what to do now. His own aunt had never liked to spare him much food, why should total strangers? Seeing a small bakery, he walked inside. At least, he thought, it was somewhere he could curl up in a corner, and it seemed like a safe place to spend the day. A small bell on the door rang as he entered. It was pleasantly warm within, and smelling of spices and freshly baked bread. It was fairly crowded, various people having poured in for lunch break. He edged slowly toward the counter, gazing longingly at the food behind the glass.

"Would you like to try a sample of our new bread? " he heard a women's voice ask. He looked up, only to see that she was speaking to the customer at the counter. After she had rung up their purchases, he stepped forward.

"May I try a sample, please?" he asked hopefully. She smiled.

"Of course young man. Here you are," she handed him a small piece of bread, and ruffled his hair. "What do you think?"

"Very good, thank you," he replied, before making his way to the back of the store to curl up in a corner. He remained there for a while, listening to conversation, half hoping, half dreading, to hear news of the events at Privet Drive, and whether the attackers were on his trail, but the mention never came. He wandered out with the majority of the customers as they filtered out of the bakery to head back to work, and continued his cautious exploration of the streets. That night however, as he lay curled up within the playground, he was hungry, and lonely, and with no idea what direction his life was headed.

-----  
-----

Though it was hard to get enough food, and life was unpredictable, Harry was managing fairly well for the most part. He had several traits

that played to his advantage. For one thing, he was used to not having anyone to look out for him, which made having to get along on his own a little easier. He had had enough experience with Dudley to avoid letting people who looked like trouble get near him. Lastly, a rather simple trait that had the potential to be either an advantage to be either an advantage or a disadvantage: a child's sense of habit. He quickly developed a sort of mental list of 'safe place'. While this could be a disadvantage, as it made him more predictable, it also allowed him to learn more.

He slept each night at the playground, and spent days between the bakery and several bookstores. The playground was a home base of sorts, though he still had to be cautious. Once he'd been awakened at night by the sounds of movement nearby, and found that a gang had stopped by to smoke, and mess with the playground equipment. He'd hid in the shadows until they'd left, feeling rather shaken. It was a place he knew, however, and the only place he felt comfortable sleeping, so he kept coming back. He generally awoke with the traffic now.

Harry had continued to return to the bakery as well. He had found that, when breakfast was being served, there was several minutes between when customers left and when workers came by to collect the plates, which often still held leftovers. He had taken to waiting for until a few customers left, then taking anything easy to carry, such as left-over croissant rolls or breakfast sandwiches, out the door with him from tables toward the back when no one was watching. He would stow these in the large pockets of his over-sized clothes to eat later.

The book stores, he like simply because he could curl up and read books off the shelves. The children's sections were usually out of the way, and he could sit and read for hours. He rotated bookstores to keep notice to a minimum. He enjoyed reading because it was something simple, normal, and entertaining in a safe place. And, he thought, as he sat in the swing, eating the food he stowed away earlier, and as he curled up in the play-tunnel, life wasn't all that bad as it was now. True, he was never really full, but he was used to small amounts of food. He was free to do mostly as he liked. But as time passed, the warmth of the indoor places where he spent his

days grew more and more important. He shivered and wrapped his arms around himself tightly as he tried to get to sleep. The cold was closing in, and he wasn't going quite as unnoticed as he thought.

-----  
-----

The young women who worked at the counter of the bakery watched as the small raven haired boy entered the store, just as he did every morning. He was still dressed in the same ragged clothes as always, and had most likely come for leftovers again, she was sure, though she'd only seen him do so a few times.. She sighed, and took out her cell phone. It would be horribly selfish of her to do nothing, just because she found the child's presence comforting, a sort of kindred soul within the chaos. She was unsure of whether he was an orphan, or just from a very poor family, but the weather was getting colder, and if he was on his own... she dialed the child help number she'd found in the phone book. After all, an orphanage would make sure he got food, and wasn't freezing to death. But somehow, as the worker an the other end reported that they'd "send someone over right away to check on the little imp," she wasn't sure whether she'd done the right thing.



*The young women who worked at the counter of the bakery watched as the small raven haired boy entered the store, just as he did every morning. He was still dressed in the same ragged clothes as always, and had most likely come for leftovers again, she was sure, though she'd only seen him do so a few times. She sighed, and took out her cell phone. It would be horribly selfish of her to do nothing, just because she found the child's presence comforting, a sort of kindred soul within the chaos. She was unsure of whether he was an orphan, or just from a very poor family, but the weather was getting colder, and if he was on his own... she dialed the child help number she'd found in the phone book. After all, an orphanage would make sure he got food, and wasn't freezing to death. But somehow, as the worker on the other end reported that they'd 'send someone over right away to check on the little imp,' she wasn't sure whether she'd done the right thing.*

-----  
-----

It was a completely terrified child who was dragged out of the back of the bakery by several agents, lips parted slightly in shock, eyes wide. He been slightly uneasy when he saw them purposely drawing nearer through the window, but once they'd entered the store and moved to surround him that he'd panicked. Jumping sprightly to his feet in alarm, he sprinted for the door. His size proved to be an advantage. Seven-year-olds are normally quite small in comparison to adults, and Harry was undersized for his age. He ducked to and through. Reaching the door he shoved it open, right before, to his dismay, someone behind him grabbed him sharply, and held on so that he could not get away.

"Where are your parents, kid?" a voice demanded roughly.

"Now see here," protested one of the customers, standing up, "he's a good kid, he hasn't done anything wrong, or bothered anybody. Leave him alone!"

"He don't have no parents, do ya kid? Dead, aren't they?" Harry gave a small nod, a rather traumatized expression on his face.

"We'll be taking him to the orphanage, unless you want him to freeze."

"No! Let me go! Please!" Harry screamed, but all his pleading was to no avail. He didn't want to go. Uncle Vernon always said he was lucky they didn't just drop him off at an orphanage. He didn't want to go anywhere worse than his aunt and uncles. He wanted to be free, even if he had no idea how to survive the cold of winter. It was irrelevant to him for the moment. He just wanted to get away. He struggled wildly, but it made no difference. He was dragged away with seemingly no effort, like a life-size rag doll, floppy clothes and hair, almost impossibly emerald eyes, fearful flailing struggle making him seem to flop to and fro. The inhabitants of the small store sat in stunned silence, staring out the window to the corner around which they'd last seen him disappear.

-----  
-----

First entering life at the orphanage, he'd acted fairly subdued. He was quiet, and mainly went about his chores, before retreating to the crummy orphanage library. He knew it wouldn't be long before he'd read everything there, but he enjoyed it as best he could while it lasted. The other inhabitants, or at least the ones who showed themselves, seemed rather loud, rough, and obnoxious. He suspected most others would have learned to avoid them. Harry would have run away, if after a while the reality of the impending winter hadn't sunken in. Here at least he had some food on a consistent basis, and wouldn't freeze, so despite, being unhappy, and feeling rather hopeless here, he made no effort to try and leave.

It was several weeks into his stay when he was confronted by a group of older boys, and asked to come join them. Didn't he want to be their friend? He ought to have known better than to trust them, of course. But he was only seven, and had always been lonely, and so he jumped at their offer of companionship without stopping to notice the jeering edge to their voices, the mocking hinted in their less-than-sincere smiles, and walked over to join them. For the next week, things seemed to have improved. He found some comfort in the loud

greetings and pats on the back, never noticing how fake they were. For an oh so brief while, things were fine.

-----  
-----

It was one week later they informed him that it was time for his first "mission." Breaking into a house.

"Ya can't expect ta ever get out of the dumps if you don't learn to take stuff kid," one of the older boys informed him, "no one's going to give you anything, you've got to take it." Harry glanced uneasily at his older comrade. He wanted to please his new friends, after all, he'd never really had any before, and it meant something to him, to really be part of something. It was the closest he'd ever come to having family. And in Harry's experience, no one ever *did* take care of you, or give you what you needed. You had to take care of yourself.

"I dunno... what if I get caught?" he questioned warily.

"You won't, trust me."

It was really those last words that made him agree. He wanted, more than anything, to be able to rely on someone else, and for others to trust him. He followed without any further request for explanation.

-----  
-----

After being taught the basics of lock braking, he was led to the front of the house the others had chosen.

"That house there, see? Just pick the lock on the front door and head strait in. Grab anything valuable that you see. It's the middle of the night, they'll be sound asleep, no need to worry." The tone the words were spoken in, however, was clearly suspicious, though Harry, mind occupied, didn't notice the overly calming, subtly mocking undertone. "We'll just move off while you make your entrance to avoid calling attention to the area."

And so it was that was Harry found himself standing alone in front of a strange house in the middle of the night. He walked to the door, and preceded to pick the lock with the hairpin they'd given him.

Before long, he found a purse on the table, and managed to grab a twenty pound note right before he heard the footsteps on the stairs. The alarm system in this particular house sounded upstairs, alerting it's inhabitants, but not the thief. Hearing the footsteps, he panicked, wishing, more than anything, to be somewhere else. When the owner of the footsteps reached the bottom of the stairs, there was no one there, and so they searched the house. The rest of the gang, who'd planned to use Harry's capture as a diversion to allow them to break in from the back, rob the house, and get out, were less lucky. Seeing the person chasing after them, they ran for the door. Most of them got away, but the last one was caught, and handed over to the police who arrived moments later.

-----  
-----

Harry was not out of trouble yet, however, and I don't mean the police. Those who escaped the house were furious at their near-capture. They caught up with him just outside of the orphanage, and everyone of them put in their two scents, or shall we say blows. Anyone who walked by would have been startled at the sight they left behind- the unconscious figure of a small boy, ragged clothes slightly torn in a way that suggested the child had recently taken a through beating, a black eye, and blood seeping from the side of his jaw, staining the once white snow.

-----  
-----

In the months that followed, Harry was careful to keep out of the way. He remained fairly swift on his feet from all the practice running from Dudley and his gang. He also worked on developing two different skills, ones the others couldn't use. He worked on disappearing from one place to another as he had in the house, concentrating hard on a specific location and his desire to be there, and unlocking and locking locks with a thought so that he might hide in empty rooms the gang

thought to be locked, and that he wouldn't have had time to unlock the normal way. Both skills he became rather good at fairly quickly out of necessity. After all, he was no match for them in a fight, being only seven, and having no one to teach him. He often watched them fight, however, so that he could get better at predicting how blows would come, and how to dodge them. He watched also, when they robbed houses, or got money as pickpockets, so that he might learn what to do, should he ever need to- and what not to do.

Despite being successful keeping out of the way, Harry had no desire to stay. When the snow melted, and the weather began to warm, he was on his feet and running. He would not stay any longer, and would deal with his troubles as they came, come what may.

*Despite being successful keeping out of the way, Harry had no desire to stay. When the snow melted, and the weather began to warm, he was on his feet and running. He would not stay any longer, and would deal with his troubles as they came, come what may.*

-----  
-----

At almost eight years old, young Harry Potter was on the run- again, messy raven lock blowing behind him, eyes set with a determined light. Indeed, he had spent several occasions flying from place to place, whether literally or figuratively. At one, he'd been flown to the Dursleys on a flying motorcycle, though he couldn't remember. All he could remember from infancy was a flash of green light, and a women screaming. Over the years more shrieks of pain and terror had been added to his nightmares, such as those of the Dursleys as his feet carried him away, and the second house he'd inhabited had gone up in flames, and sometimes, his own screams, often almost inaudible over the fierce winter wind and the pounding of his heart, and the harsh labored sound of his own breath that always surrounded him in those dreams.

So perhaps his actions this time were merely the continuation of a tradition. He had a large bundle with him this time, filled with a few sets of clothes, a blanket, several bottles of water, and a few loafs of bread. It was only after he had collected these supplies to bring with him that he brought the box of matches out from his pocket. He nimbly lit a match, then dropped it on the floor. There was not much flammable material near by, so it couldn't spread far, and would never light up the house the way the last two fires had. But it was enough that, with the smoke alarms that would soon be ringing, everyone leaving the building, and the fireman who would have to search for the fire and extinguish it, it was enough that he would be long gone before anyone noticed he wasn't there.

-----  
-----

By the time dusk fell, though Harry was sure no one from the orphanage would catch up, he was tired and hungry. He sat down,

back against a tall, branching oak, and removed a water bottle and a piece of bread from his pack. After scarfing down the slice of bread, and taking several gulps of water, he closed his eyes, and concentrated hard, wishing to be somewhere sheltered, but out of the way. He had no desire to keep running for much longer, and though it wasn't the same as thinking of a specific place, the first time when he had had to escape from the house the older kids had convinced him to break into, he his focus had just been a strong wish to get away. He just hoped that it would work, because he wasn't sure where he should head if it didn't. He was sure no one would drag him back to the orphanage, as long as he didn't draw too much attention to himself. He had several sets of clothes from the orphanage, which, while a bit shabby, were not as noticeable, and he'd honed his skills at staying out of sight and not attracting attention over the past few months.

Luckily, his attempt did succeed, most likely just because of the great amount of concentration and desire for it to work that Harry poured in. A moment later, the spot where Harry had stood held only empty air. The place Harry reappeared in appeared to be an old, abandoned manor. It was dusty, and had fallen into disrepair, and the window of the room into which he had appeared was boarded. It was shelter, and despite, or perhaps because of, its odd appearance, it seemed safe enough. It was rather comforting, to have shelter that no one else would come to. Despite the fact that he wasn't sure what the surroundings were like, and that the food he had brought with him wouldn't last long, it was extremely satisfying. He had, for the moment, a place to belong to. He had arrived in a manor with a most interesting history, though he did not know it. It stood atop a hill overlooking a town called Little Hangleton, ivy crawling up its sides, shingles fallen here and there. He was lucky in his own way, for, you see, it was one place that, as long as they were not alerted someone was there, no one would go to for many years. It was a place known to those who lived around it as the Riddle house, a place no one would visit, or try to knock down in its derelict state. Even the old gardener never went inside, though people would sometimes attempt to break in on bets, they never dared to venture as far as he was now- the back bedroom on the top floor.

Resolving to explore in the morning, he through the dusty covers off, then curled up on the bed, wrapping his shabby coat around himself, and within moments, was fast asleep. He slept better that night than he had in a long time, for once unhaunted by the screams that had plagued his dreams for what seemed like almost eternity, without disturbance, and without fear of the day to come.

It is one of the many ironies of life that things are hardly ever as they seem. This strange, misshapen manor, still called after its former inhabitants by the folk of Little Hangleton, and thought "creepy" by most for the events that had happened nearly fifty years ago, was relatively safe for young Harry Potter. It was exactly the sort of place he'd concentrated on transporting himself to- a sheltered place where he was unlikely to be found against his will. It was a rather odd occurrence, though he didn't no it, that Riddle manor, a place still associated with the man who had killed his parents all those years ago, would be the first place that he called home.

-----  
-----

The assumption Harry held that they would not be able to catch him once he left was, in fact, quite correct. The fire had only truly managed to really destroy one room- the one Harry had left from. No one was truly interested in his location, besides to cover up that he had ever been there at all. They feared that, if investigated, others would discover what they thought to be, most likely, the truth: that a seven-year-old child had been burned to cinders in the fire, while the rest of them blundered about, waiting for the firefighters. Harry Potter had never been connected to the child, for, as far as anyone knew, no one had survived the fire at Privet Drive. The adults at the orphanage had nothing on which to make the connection, after all, they had never known any name for him but Harry. He'd refused to tell them anything about himself, and so he wasn't their responsibility, not really, and no one had come looking for him, but all the same, it left an unsettling feeling hanging in the hearts of all who had heard. It was a feeling which would linger for years to come as they reflected on their lives, and tried to forget the small child with raven hair and emerald eyes, who's suffering had occurred without their comfort or intervention. Perhaps it was because, as often happens with people



who have passed away when people who never really knew them reflect on them, he became a symbol to them of their own failures, and of the pain and loneliness and vulnerability that everyone has within sometime during their lives.

*...It was exactly the sort of place he'd concentrated on transporting himself to- a sheltered place where he was unlikely to be found against his will. It was a rather odd occurrence, though he didn't no it, that Riddle manor, a place still associated with the man who had killed his parents all those years ago, would be the first place that he called home.*

-

Upon awakening the next day, Harry began to explore his new surroundings, and to plan. While in general he had always had to take things one day at a time, for the most part, it was always best to have a general idea of where he would spend time, and what he would do to get food. Exploring the manor, he found that it had clearly not been inhabited for a long time. There wasn't any food or money there that might be of use, though he found some old curtains and blankets, which he dragged up to the small bedroom he'd slept in, after shaking the dust out. The house would be enough to serve as shelter once winter arrived, at least with the old blankets in which he could curl up. Still, he only had enough food to last a week or so, if he rationed it, and the twenty pound note would most likely be needed when winter arrived.

Harry was, this time around, much more cautious. He had no desire to be found and dragged off like the last time, and so he did his best to stay out of sight. He avoided public places, and used his 'disappearing trick' to get in and out of the house. The last thing he wanted was to be spotted nearby. It was for this reason that he turned to theft. Breaking into different houses each time, all of them isolated, a while a way from Little Hangleton, prevented him from being as easy to catch, and from anyone finding his home base. He took food for the most part, things that would be less likely to be noticed, and a few pounds here and there, but never much money, as it was more noticeable. He kept his stash of food in the little bedroom with him, hidden in a small closet. What he had learned about stealth from the other boys had paid off, as well as being able to wish himself back to the manor at any time. Despite that it was hard, as he had to visit multiple places a day, since he kept to getting unnoticeable amounts, he got by well enough. His store of food gradually increased. He slept a good deal as well, which helped him get by on

less, as wishing himself from place to place was tiring. It was satisfying to be free, even if it was anything but an easy life.

-

It was inevitable, I suppose, that Harry would continue to develop skills of stealth- and that he would only trust people less as time passed. It happened that, one of the times Harry was in a house when it's owners returned, it was a family returning. He had had the bad luck of entering almost right before they arrived home. He heard children laughing, and their parents ushering them inside. It lead to a new skill, frankly, because it caused him to wish for something entirely different when he tried to wish himself away. You see, he had the concentration right, but he didn't truly wish to leave. All he really wished was that they wouldn't be able to see him. And so it was that when the family came inside, they saw no one there.

He watched the family for several months, in-between his 'raids,' sleep, and exploration. It was odd, really. He knew them so well, that sometimes he could forget that they didn't know him at all. He thought of them, in a way, as *his* family. He had no one else to call family, after all. He learned from following them, on a minor scale, as well. He learned about a large chain grocery store that was nearly putting the local one out of business from their complaints, and with the large amount of space and products inside, and his knack for invisibility, found it easy to rob from. He learned about an orchard as well, one time when the family went berry picking, and ate berries as he pleased as he watched the children, laughing and prancing around as they filled their baskets, the parents patiently picking the fruits, and occasionally glancing over and smiling. Most of all, however, he got a taste of what it might have been like to have a childhood, and a family. It was always bittersweet, standing there, watching, such sweet poison.

It was mid-August when one day he appeared in there house. He greeted them, introduced himself as Harry, and went to sit down at the table with them. They stared at him, shocked for a moment. Only moments later he was being reprimanding for trespassing. After all, he was told, he had not place there. His lips parted slightly in distress and alarm, eyes opened wide, and without a word he fled. He never

returned to there home. It wasn't hard to avoid, after all, being a ways out from Little Hangleton. To think he had almost thought of them as family- but he knew better now. The only one he could trust, he had learned, was himself.

-

*It was mid-August when one day he appeared in their house. He greeted them, introduced himself as Harry, and went to sit down at the table with them. They stared at him, shocked for a moment. Only moments later he was being reprimanded for trespassing. After all, he was told, he had no place there. His lips parted slightly in distress and alarm, eyes opened wide, and without a word he fled. He never returned to their home. It wasn't hard to avoid, after all, being a ways out from Little Hangleton. To think he had almost thought of them as family- but he knew better now. The only one he could trust, he had learned, was himself.*

---

As the temperatures around Little Hangleton dropped, despite the transition of autumn into winter, Harry was still managing reasonably on his own. He slept in the small closet now, curled up in his pile of old blankets and draperies. It was warmer than the rest of the room when he kept it closed, being smaller. People spent less time outside, but there were still enough hours where they were out at work and school on weekdays for Harry to get some food, and there was always the supermarket, which was easy to rob. The main problem, currently was that it was cold, and he had no particular desire to go wandering about in it.

Besides the cold, however, life was rather repetitive. Most of the shops were small, not big enough for him to remain invisible in without getting bumped into. It didn't have, either, the sort of large bookshop the last town had, where he could sit reading for hours. It wasn't all that long before Harry found himself hanging out at the edge of town, observing the people as they hustled and bustled through their daily lives.

Around midwinter, Harry finally ventured as far as to make an appearance in a public place- a small pub in the town below his home. He was more cautious this time than he had been in the past, however, and made sure to change into one of the less ragged sets of clothes he'd brought from the orphanage in hopes of drawing less attention, and to think up a good back up story in case he was questioned.

Walking up to the counter, he ordered a small bowl of soup. Despite that he had enough food to get by, it was always non-cooked, and easily storable. It wouldn't cost all of his money, and with the cold all around, he wanted something warm.

"Would you like anything to drink with that? Hot chocolate, milk..."

"No thank you, madam. My family doesn't have much money to spare."

"Come to think of it, shouldn't you be in school?"

"Mum and Dad home school me, each evening after work. I usually just study during the day, but it's so cold..."

"I see. Well, you're welcome to hang out here, if you'd like. It's a bit loud in here, but it's warm. What's your name?"

"Harry." He hesitated for a moment, then asked, "Do you think, maybe, I could help out here during the day sometimes, in exchange for warm food? Mum and Dad work long hours to support us, but we're still always a little short on things."

She gave him a calculating glance, then questioned, "What kind of jobs are you proposing to help out with?"

"Cooking and cleaning. I've been doing my best to help out around the house since I was five."

"Eat your soup. You can come back to the kitchens afterwards if you would like, and see what you can cook."

Harry smiled, then sat down, huddled in the corner, and enjoyed the first warm meal he'd had for a long time.

---

All the staff at the pub had found Harry rather surprising. No one was really sure what they ought to do about him, after all, this was a child, and children aren't supposed to work, but, from the shabby clothes and genuine interest he showed in the idea of helping out here, it was

obvious the kid and his family weren't well off. It was hard to tell his age, as well. His slightly longish hair and mature manner gave an impression of an age several years older than the age indicated by his size, though this was probably partly due to malnutrition.

The determining factor was that none of them had any idea of how to turn him away, so they simply settled on seeing what would happen, and keeping an eye on the child. Harry's first cooking experiment turned out to be a success. The lady from the counter allowed him to cook whatever he wanted from what they had around the kitchen, and, surprisingly, he proved quite adept at adding various ingredients and spices together. It was agreed that he would invent something for the special of each meal, and would get a portion of each himself.

Oddly enough, it was soon rather difficult to imagine what it had been like without the child. Both workers and regulars had grown fond of Harry. He was sent home, of course, before evening, when more of the shadier customers would arrive. Some visitors would even spend hours furthering his learning, or reading to him, usually the ones who were having a hard time, and needed some routine to hold their lives together.

Harry enjoyed the job a good deal. The meals he made were well liked, and brought in a variety of friendly customers, and though he didn't ever truly trust anyone there, he got warm food, entertainment, education, and company. He found it easy enough to lie convincingly, as all he had to do was recount the details of what he'd dreamt of most, back when he was truly the innocent child they saw in his place now, though that part of him had long ago faded. He did his best to act hopeful, and as if he truly had a loving family waiting for him at home. It gave everyone else hope, and he got food, and tips, and sometimes even presents, usually books. It was, truly, the most content he could remember being, and though, in truth, he was as alone as ever, in his own way, he had become a part of Little Hangleton.

---

There are times in life when it feels like your world is falling apart. Some things can, in very little time, change everything. It's a

phenomenon Harry had experienced many times before, for someone so young. His parents deaths when he was one, the attack on Privet Drive, being dragged to the orphanage, getting tricked, ridiculed, and beaten up, running away... so many different incidents, all which were very similar in that each tore his world apart. It's a feeling that Harry would feel many times in the future, a future in which nothing ever seemed normal and it would often be a struggle just to survive. It was a feeling that he got now, as he realized that he wasn't alone in the house.

Harry had, of course, by now heard the tales of the Riddle House, where he lived, the story of how the Riddles had been found dead, with no detectable cause of death. It was a topic of discussion every now and then in the village, but Harry had continued to live there, all the same. It was, after all, home. Besides, he had always thought that, if something odd or dangerous was going on, it was best that he knew, and odd things were more likely to begin here than anywhere else in Little Hangleton. Despite his knowledge of the manor's strange history, when he heard voices down stairs, he was still surprised. Focusing on not being detected, he crept downstairs. He could hear them more clearly now.

"...apply for the defense position my Lord?"

"Of course, Quirrel. We must find the location of the stone, and besides, if the Potter boy still lives, he will be attending Hogwarts this year. He was my downfall once, did you really think I'd allow him to get away with it for good, with just a pathetic scar?"

"Are you sure the boy won't prove trouble my Lord?"

"How dare you! Are you really so bothered by an eleven-year-old child, who probably doesn't even know he's a wizard? Insolent wretch." A faint whimpering was audible.

"Please, my Lord, mercy."

"If you fail me again..."

"I won't, master!"



"I'll be forced to supervise you more closely. Come now, Quirrel. We've found enough information here. My old books had all the information we'll need."

"Yes master."

The man got up and walked from the room, for indeed, there was only one person there. Harry followed, undetected. He had several reasons for doing so. To start with, he was curious. He wanted to learn more, especially about magic, or whatever it was he'd been using for the past few years. He didn't trust this person, these people, as far as he could throw them, which was not at all, and didn't think it was a good idea to let him, them, get out of his sight before he'd learned more. But first and foremost, he, or they, whichever it was, had mentioned his name, and obviously was up to something. Harry, for one, wanted to find out what.

*"If you fail me again..."*

*"I won't master!"*

*"I'll be forced to supervise you more closely. Come now, Quirrel. We've found enough information here. My old books had all the information we'll need."*

*"Yes master."*

*The man got up and walked from the room, for indeed, there was only one person there. Harry followed, undetected. He had several reasons for doing so. To start with, he was curious. He wanted to learn more, especially about magic, or whatever it was he'd been using for the past few years. He didn't trust this person, these people, as far as he could throw them, which was not at all, and didn't think it was a good idea to let him, them, get out of his sight before he'd learned more. But first and foremost, he, or they, whichever it was, had mentioned his name, and obviously was up to something. Harry, for one, wanted to find out what.*

---

"How should we travel to Hogwarts, my Lord?"

"Aparate to Hogshead."

"My Lord?"

"How did you think we'd get there, fool? The Hogwarts Express?"

"Nnnno m-milord. It doesn't leave Kings Cross until s-September first. The barrier to Platform nine and three quarters w-will be closed until then. We need t-to get the j-job first."

"And Hogsmeade is the nearest apparation point. Quit wasting my time!"

"Yes m-my Lord."

A loud crack filled the air, and in a moment, they were gone. Harry stared at the empty spot where the man had stood only moments before. How distastefully unsubtle. Harry always traveled *without* the irritating sound effects. He couldn't follow him, them, whichever it was, at the moment, but he knew plainly enough where he could go to find them. He didn't have a ticket on the "Hogwarts Express," but he could sneak on easily enough, if he could manage to get to Kings Cross.

---

The first thing he needed to do was cover his tracks, in other words insure he wouldn't be missed at the pub if he was gone for a lengthy duration of time, which he suspected he would be, and secure transportation to Kings Cross Station. Little Hangleton was, frankly, too small to be connected to the railway system, and it was a fair distance to London. He could try and travel by bus routes, but that would cost money, and he wasn't sure how long he'd be gone; he might need it for emergencies. He didn't know what times all the buses he would need would leave, or how long it would take to get from place to place, which was problematic, and would run the risk of not being able to find somewhere safe to spend the night. His best bet was probably to play off the townspeople's affection and sympathy for him, and so the next day, upon entering the pub, he brought up the issue.

"I might be leaving in little while. Leaving Little Hangleton I mean."

"What?"

"Where? Why?"

"We almost have enough for me to go to a proper school now. We've been saving for years. If only..."

"Sounds great kid, what's the problem?"

"I need to figure out a way to get to London by eleven on September the first if I'm to go. We don't own a car, and public transportation costs money. It's a long ways to travel."

"No problem, kid." It was one of the younger waitresses, who had just come by to collect dishes, who spoke up, "Dad was planning to take me to London sometime next fall, as I need to be looking around at universities. No reason we couldn't go then, and give you a ride."

"Thanks Kait," he gave an innocent, thankful grin in her direction.

One of the customers spoke up gruffly, "Be sure to come back on holidays and visit us all, mind."

"Of course."

---

London is, to say the least, a rather interesting city. Whether you're looking for shops, youth hostels, museums, interesting architecture, or the sites of various horror stories, it is a city with something to offer. An interesting mix of modern buildings and old stone ones, many of which now have modern metal roofs, it displays one of the distinct qualities of England- its history. While many of those who have lived around ancient castles and cathedrals all their lives are used to them, visitors are often seen staring at them in amazement (recognizable, of course, by things such as clothes displaying names of places in Britain, cameras, and obvious lack of British accents). Harry wandered through London, looking for signs, and occasionally asking for directions until he found Kings Cross.

He had a disguise of sorts, as he deemed it less than wise to be invisible in a crowded station. His hair was shoulder length now, so that wasn't a problem, as it was much longer than it had been at his relatives or at the orphanage. He wore an old pair of sunglasses and had a bandana tied around his forehead, both items which he'd nicked from houses a few miles from Little Hangleton. As his eyes and his scar were, he figured, his most noticeable features, he thought it was best to keep them covered. It was best, in Harry's experience, to be noticed as little as possible.

The train station itself was bustling with people preparing to board trains to various places. Harry had arrived by 10:15, and as he wasn't entirely sure where to go next, he spent his first few minutes glancing around. The ceiling was high, and arch-shaped. Set of train tracks

could be seen, with people hurrying to get on board, and in some cases get their luggage to the baggage car. Each platform was clearly marked, and an electronic sign read, 'Welcome to Kings Cross.' A set of stairs near by lead down, away from the trains, to the subway. He followed a sign on the wall, which read, 'Platforms 9-11,' finally reaching Platforms nine and ten. Then he stood to the side, eyes scanning over the crowd, listening alertly in search of something that might give him a further clue as to what to do next.

It was a red headed family that finally caught Harry's attention. They used odd vocabulary (such as 'Muggles,' whatever that meant), and one of the older children had a owl. After watching them disappear through the barrier between nine and ten, he switched to invisibility and followed.

Walking through something that looks solid is decidedly odd. It felt, in a way, like an acknowledgement that nothing would ever be normal in his life. On the other side, a scarlet steam engine could be seen by a Platform that was, unfortunately, packed with people. He dodged through the crowd as carefully as possible, and slipped into the last empty compartment on the train to sit down, invisible. He decided against moving far into the corner. He need to be able to move if necessary.

Glancing out the window, he could see the red-headed family. It was rather unsurprising that he had noticed them, they were a rather conspicuous bunch. Oddly enough, it was mostly children boarding. It seemed rather ironic, almost as if this Hogwarts place was actually a school, as he'd told those he did associate with in Little Hangleton. Hell, with his luck it probably was a school. He took a moment to tune into what they were saying in hopes that he might learn something useful.

"Can't stay long Mother. I'm up front, the prefects have got two compartments to themselves-"

"Oh, are you a *prefect*, Percy?" said one of the twins, with an air of great surprise. "You should have said something, we had no idea."

"Hang on, I think I remember him saying something about it," said the other twin. "Once-"

"Or twice-"

"A minute-"

"All summer-"

"Oh, shut up," said Percy the Prefect.

"How come Percy gets new robes, anyway?" asked one of the twins.

"Because he's a *prefect*," said their mother fondly. "All right, dear, well, have a good term- send me an owl when you get there."

Well, it was definitely a school then. A boarding school, by the sound of it. Send an owl, however? That and the fact they'd had to walk through a wall to get here indicated that it was almost assuredly not an ordinary boarding school.

"Now, you two- this year, you behave yourselves. If I get one more owl telling me you've- you've blown up a toilet or-"

"Blown up a toilet? We've never blown up a toilet."

"Great idea though, thanks, Mum."

"It's *not funny*. Any look after Ron."

"Don't worry, ickle Ronniekins is safe with us."

"Shut up," said Ron again.

A whistle sounded.

"Hurry up!" their mother said, and the three boys clambered onto the train. Their younger sister began to cry.

"Don't, Ginny, we'll send you loads of owls."

"We'll send you a Hogwarts toilet seat."

"George!"

"Only joking, Mum."

The train began to move, starting its journey to take Harry to the school, Hogwarts, where ever that was. A school where Quirrel was in some sort of plot with a voice in his head over the theft of a rock, which despite sounding like pure lunacy, it was important to some extent at least, because he knew something of Harry. I short, a train was taking him on some crazy wild goose chase over something he'd heard, but he couldn't have stayed at the manor without finding out, as they'd gone in there before, and strangely, despite the craziness, he didn't regret being here. The red-headed boys' mother and sister were running beside the train, half laughing, half crying, until the train gathered speed. Moments later the platform was out of sight.

*"Don't, Ginny, we'll send you loads of owls."*

*"We'll send you a Hogwarts toilet seat."*

*"George!"*

*"Only joking, Mum."*

*The train began to move, starting its journey to take Harry to the school, Hogwarts, where ever that was. A school where Quirrel was in some sort of plot with a voice in his head over the theft of a rock, which despite sounding like pure lunacy, it was important to some extent at least, because he knew something of Harry. In short, a train was taking him on some crazy wild goose chase over something he'd heard, but he couldn't have stayed at the manor without finding out, as they'd gone in there before, and strangely, despite the craziness, he didn't regret being here. The red-headed boys' mother and sister were running beside the train, half laughing, half crying, until the train gathered speed. Moments later the platform was out of sight.*

---

The compartment door slid open and the youngest of the red-headed boys, Ron, came in and sat down. Harry watched him for a little while, before, dozing off. It was best to get some rest now, while he had a chance, and there isn't much you can do when you're invisible without giving away your presence. The train ride passed, for the most part, without event. He was awakened briefly on several occasions. The first time was when a snack trolley was brought through, carrying an assortment of unfamiliar quantities: Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans, Drooble's Best Blowing Gum, Chocolate Frogs, Pumpkin Pasties, Cauldron Cakes, Licorice Wands, and a number of other strange things Harry had never seen in his life. Ron stayed in the compartment, and got out a lumpy package which turned out to contain four sandwiches. Harry couldn't help wishing that he could get something off the trolley, or at least get some food out from his bag. Unfortunately, he didn't think any amount of pounds would help him, and he couldn't get food from the trolley or from his knapsack without extreme risk of detection. Unzipping the bag, or opening the compartment door to reach the trolley were hardly subtle moves.



The next time he awoke it was to a knock on the compartment door, just before it slid open. A round faced boy came in, looking rather tearful.

"Sorry," he said, "but have you seen a toad at all?"

When Ron shook his head, he wailed, "I've lost him! He keeps getting away from me!"

There was an uncomfortable silence.

"Well, if you see him..." he trailed off miserably.

He left.

Several minutes later, he was back, this time accompanied by a girl.

"Anyone seen a toad? Neville's lost one," she said. She had a bossy sort of voice, lots of bushy brown hair, and rather large front teeth.

She was wearing long black robes. Odd... but then again, so had been every other event recently, so Harry wasn't bothered, just curious. He paused his pondering to tune in on what she was saying.

"...Nobody in my family's magic at all, it was ever such a surprise when I got my letter, but I was ever so pleased, of course, I mean it's the very best school of witchcraft there is, I've heard- I've learned all our course books by heart, of course, I just hope it be enough- I'm Hermione Granger, by the way, who are you?"

She said all this very fast.

Harry, of course, while finding it all rather surprising, not to mention extraordinary to believe, thought it explained a lot. 'Very best school of *witchcraft*,' was certainly explanatory when it came to all the odd happenings on his way here, and, in a way, it explained something about all the seemingly impossible skills Harry had come to rely on for the past few years.

"I'm Ron Weasley," Ron muttered.

There was another awkward silence.

"You'd had better change, you know, I expect we'll be there soon."

And she left, taking the toadless boy with her.

Several minutes later, a voice echoed through the train: "We will be reaching Hogwarts in five minutes' time. Please leave your luggage on the train, it will be taken to the school separately."

Ron got up and went out to join the crowd thronging the corridor, and Harry followed, invisible, bringing his knapsack with him. It wouldn't do to leave any evidence of his presence.

The train slowed right down and finally stopped. Upon exiting the train Harry found himself out on a tiny, dark platform. It was night, and the air was slightly chilly. Moments later a lamp came bobbing over the heads of the students, and voice could be heard calling out: "Firs' years! Firs' years over here!"

It was a giant of a man, face almost hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair, and a wild tangled beard. You could make out his eyes, however, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.

"C'mon, follow me- any more firs' years? Mind yer step, now! Firs' years follow me!"

Harry made a hasty decision *not* to go with the first years. He was trying to find information on Quirrel, not an introduction for attending school.

He followed the rest of the school along the platform and out onto a rough mud track, where at least a hundred stagecoaches awaited the remaining students, each pulled, Harry could only assume, by an invisible horse, because once he'd boarded one of the less crowded ones and the door had been shut, the coach started off all by itself, bumping and swaying in procession.

The carriage was headed towards a pair of magnificent wrought iron gates, flanked with stone columns topped with winged boars. After passing the gates, the carriage picked up speed for a long, sloping

drive. Harry could see it now; perched atop a high mountain, its windows sparkling in the starry sky, was a vast castle with many turrets and towers, a castle that Harry knew, without a doubt, must be Hogwarts.

At last, the carriage swayed to a halt. Harry waited for the other students to get out, so as not to be noticed, then followed them, out, down on to the path, and up the stone steps to the castle.

---

While Harry had followed the rest of the school to the carriages, the first years were trudging a different path, down towards the boats, led by Hagrid, they were fairly quiet, for a little while at least.

"He seems glum," muttered Ron, glancing at the gamekeeper.

"Of course he is, all the staff probably are. Don't you know anything?" exclaimed Hermione, quietly enough not to be heard by Hagrid.

"Why don't you enlighten us then, if you know so much," Ron retorted, obviously annoyed.

"This is the year *Harry Potter* was supposed to have come to Hogwarts."

"And we should care, why?" sneered a blond boy near by.

"Because it's *Harry Potter*," Ron glared back, "Just who do you think you are, anyway?"

"Draco Malfoy," Ron snorted, "No need to ask who you are. Red hair, freckles, and more children than they can afford. You must be a Weasley. And I don't see why you bother. The all it took to kill the pathetic brat was a house fire."

The group continued in silence. After Hagrid had to separate the two, that is.

---

The red-headed twins were in a small corridor, near the entrance hall, bent over what appeared to be a bunch of prank supplies, and a map.

"... have to do something different this year."

"Wait, someone's coming."

"Look and the name, brother dearest. I think we may have found a solution."

"Show yourself, Potter, we know you're there."

Harry chose to comply. They were pranksters, after all, and likely wouldn't be hard to deal with. He sat down beside the twins, and glanced at the map. It appeared to be a map of Hogwarts, complete with all the people within it, and what seemed to be secret passages.

"So," one of twins spoke up, "will you help us with a prank?"

"If I so decide, you owe me help in the future, should I need it. Within reason, of course."

"Quite."

"Agreed. So here's the plan."

"At some point during the feast, we'll set off fireworks."

"When we do, you make yourself visible so that you're there when the smoke clears."

Harry looked at them questioningly, eyebrows raised.

"And this is a decent prank, why?"

"We'll say a few things to set it up..."

"...And it'll be shocking!"

"You do know everyone thinks your dead, right?"

There was a brief pause.

"No, I didn't, actually," Harry answered, smirking slightly.

"Oh, alright then-"

"-We'll fill you in later."

"But at any rate-"

"They're likely to think-"

"-for a moment at least-"

"That you're a ghost. There are ghosts here by the way."

"I see. Two things to consider, then; Do you actually plan on trying to make me look like a ghost to further the effect, and what am I supposed to do once I've let it be discovered that I'm here?"

---

---

*"But at any rate-"*

*"They're likely to think-"*

*"-for a moment at least-"*

*"That you're a ghost. There are ghosts here by the way."*

*"I see. Two things to consider, then; Do you actually plan on trying to make me look like a ghost to further the effect, and what am I supposed to do once I've let it be discovered that I'm here?"*

---

"Hmmn... good idea, w'dya think Fred?"

"Quite, quite, now all we have to think of..."

"Is how."

They were looking through what appeared to be a notebook they'd put together of amusing spells and charms... or, if you're Fred or George, useful information.

"Here... look, fizzing wizzbees, that'll work for floating..."

"Fake injuries, a few fake burns here and there, maybe a few fake cuts for extra effect..."

"Hope you don't mind if we singe the hems of your clothes a little-"

"What about transparency?"

"Can't find anything so far-"

"Harry-"

"You can turn invisible-"

"And visible-"

"Can you turn transparent?"

"I'm not sure. I'll try," he replied, sounding mildly annoyed, "If you'll tell me what I'm to do once I'm seen."

They shrugged.

"You could go to school here-"

"You were supposed to, before you 'died,' after all-"

"You could even-"

"Keep pretending to be a ghost-"

"Until someone realizes you're not."

Harry considered this. If he went to school here, he would learn more about magic, and be able to keep an eye on Quirrel. If he managed to fool people into thinking he was a ghost, however, he wouldn't be under authority to the same degree. He would most likely be underestimated, and would earn less attention from the general population than if he was a student. It would be more interesting, at any rate, than staying invisible. He could gain a more neutral position here, and probably learn more, though it would be more of a risk. The wiser people present would most likely find the new ghost quite suspicious. It was a gamble, but it was worth it. He couldn't hide forever if he was to gain anything, and hiding in plain view would be all the more fun. Being a student here would be interesting anyway, if things did go awry, and he didn't have to remain semi-visible all the time...

"Alright."

He closed his eyes and concentrated on how much he wanted to be transparent, and on the feeling of changing degree of visibility.

"Did it work?"

"Well, uh-"

"Sorta, might need practice-"

"Sorry mate, but-"

"Ghosts are all pearly white-"

"Try making color invisible."

He tried again, focusing as much as he could. When he opened his eyes, he found the twins grinning at him.

"Wicked!"

"Magnificent!"

"Fabulous!"

"Right, let's see to the fake burns then..."

"I must say, they look much more convincing when you're silvery and transparent-"

"And the singing..."

"How 'bout a fake cut here?"

"Good, here's a mirror-"

"Take a look!"

Harry glanced at the mirror, then blinked in surprise. He looked, in short, quite convincingly like a ghost. He was semi-transparent, and pearly white, though his hair and the singed hems of his cloths were a shade darker, and there was a faint hint of green to his eyes. They had removed the bandana and sunglasses, so that his scar and eyes were clearly visible, and added fake injuries. His hands and the back of his neck were almost completely covered, and in some places silvery fake blood oozed out. He had a fake burn on one cheek, and a fake cut along his hairline on one side with drops of silvery fake blood. His clothes, which had already been a bit worse-for-wear, now were singed a bit here and there, as if had been in a fire.

A slow smile spread across his face, and he nodded.

"Don't forget the fizzing whizbees," one commented, pressing a small container into his hand.



"They'll make you float-"

"So just eat a few-"

"-right before you make yourself semi-visible."

"Get the rest out of sight-"

"To avoid suspicion. Save them for later."

He nodded.

"Alright then,"

"Make yourself invisible-"

"And follow us."

---

Severus Snape was not having a good day. The staff were all on edge, hell *everyone* was on edge. Today was the day Harry Potter was to have come to Hogwarts, and despite they'd known him to be dead for years, it was somehow all the worse today. They'd thought, for awhile, that they would find out any day that it wasn't true, but the day had come, and they had to face what they'd known for years: that Harry Potter was dead.

The Potter brat was dead. The son of his arch-nemesis was dead. The child-savior of the wizarding world was dead. A child he owed his life to nearly twice over- once indirectly, through James Potter, and once for the past few years of freedom from the dark lord. Because Harry Potter was all of these things, and the fact that this was the day he would have come to Hogwarts surfaced the old wound all over again.

To make it all worse, Minerva had requested that he bring in the first years, as she felt she needed to stay to give the headmaster support. The sorting hat had been brought in, and the little brats were *still* chattering.

"Weasley!" he snapped, "quit the senseless chatter."

"Now that's not very nice..." said a voice from behind him.

---

The Weasley twins had spent a few moments looking for a target to say a few choice remarks to in order to set up their prank. On seeing Snape only a little ways away with the first years, they exchanged evil grins, before sneaking over to stand behind him where he stood with the group of first years.

"...quit the senseless chatter."

"Now that's not very nice..." one commented.

"You ought to be more nice to ickle Ronniekins-"

Both Ron and Snape glared at them.

"To help you learn to be nice, and how to have an obnoxious sunshine and daisies attitude-

"You will be visited by *three* ghosts, starting-"

"NOW!"

With that they set off the fireworks. When the smoke cleared, Severus Snape found himself faced with what appeared to be a ghost, hovering a few feet off the ground, a ghost of a young boy, with wavy, shoulder-length hair, several burn marks, singed clothes, and a lightening scar. A ghost that was, undeniably, that of Harry Potter. The entire hall had gone quiet.

"Bloody hell," Severus muttered softly in utter shock.

Fred and George were grinning triumphantly. It was, of course, a much less somber moment for them than anyone else, as they knew perfectly well that he wasn't a ghost at all.

Harry smirked, glancing around, then remarked to Severus, eyebrows raised: "Easily startled lot, aren't they?"

Severus smirked back.

"That they are."

"Definitely." remarked the twins, still grinning.

Severus merely glanced between them, eyebrows raised, and shook his head. Perhaps, he thought, he wouldn't the presence of one Harry Potter at Hogwarts nearly as much as he one thought he would.

---

After getting over his shock, Headmaster Albus Dumbledore called the hall back to order, instructing that they continue with the sorting as usual.

"Right," said George.

"Come on, Harry,"

"You can come sit with us, for now,"

"If you want to watch the sorting-"

"-or we could just make a grand exist now,"

"And head down to the kitchen."

"Or you make your grand exist *after* the sorting," remarked Severus wryly.

Harry nodded.

"Right-o, Harry. See ya Professor."

Harry followed, floating after Fred and George over to the end of a long table. A stool had been brought out, and a ragged hat placed upon it. A rip in its brim opened up, and it began to sing:

*"Oh, you may not think I'm pretty,*

*But don't judge on what you see,*

*I'll eat myself if you can find*

*A smarter hat than me.*

*You can keep your bowlers black,*

*Your top hats sleek and tall,*

*For I'm the Hogwarts Sorting Hat*

*And I can cap them all.*

*There's nothing hidden in your head*

*The Sorting Hat can't see,*

*So try me on and I will tell you*

*Where you ought to be.*

*You might belong in Gryffindor,*

*Where dwell the brave at heart,*

*Their daring, nerve, and chivalry*

*Set Gryffindors apart;*

*You might belong in Hufflepuff,*

*Where they are just and loyal,*

*Those patient Hufflepuffs are true*

*And unafraid of toil;*

*Or yet in wise old Ravenclaw, If you've a ready mind,*

*Where those of wit and learning,*

*Will always find their kind;*

*Or perhaps in Slytherin*

*You'll make your real friends,  
Those cunning folk use any means  
To achieve their ends.  
So put me on! Don't be afraid!  
And don't get in a flap!  
You're in safe hands (though I have none)  
For I'm a thinking Cap!"*

The whole hall burst into applause as the hat finished its song. It bowed to each of the four tables and then became quite still again.

Professor Snape stepped forward holding a long roll of parchment, and began to call out names.

"Abbott, Hannah!"

"HUFFLEPUFF!"

"Bones, Susan!"

"HUFFLEPUFF!"

"Boot, Terry!"

"RAVENCLAW!"

The list was fairly long, and Harry soon stopped trying to keep track. Hermione Granger, upon being sorted into Gryffindor, came and sat near Harry and the twins, and gave him a nervous smile.

"Err, hi, I'm Hermione Granger, nice to meet you."

"Harry Potter, and it's a pleasure."

Ron Weasley also joined the Gryffindor table.

"Way to go Ronniekins."

Ron glared at the twins.

"Shut up," he told them for the millionth time.

Harry smirked.

"Well done, Ron. Excellent," said Percy pompously.

The sorting continued to pass without event. Harry resolved to make sure and check out the other houses, and talk to those students later. Looking around, the Great Hall was quite impressive. It contained four student tables, one for each house, and a staff table, which had the Hogwart's Crest above it. The hall was illuminated by floating candles, and the ceiling-

"It's bewitched to look like the sky outside. I read about it in *Hogwarts, a History*," Hermione whispered, following his gaze.

Harry shrugged.

"Never read it. Does it mention anything out how they managed it?"

"No, unfortunately."

"Pity. That would be interesting. I wasn't raised by wizards, so I don't know much about how they do magic here."

"I've tried several simple spells, and read through our text books- you wouldn't have been able to, would you? I'm sorry. Maybe I can go over some of the material we learn in class with you some time, if you'd like."

"Sure, thanks."

"You can always come to class with us as well," commented Fred.

"Just think of the stir it'd cause!" George agreed, grinning.

"Well, I guess that would be one way to learn," said Hermione dubiously.

Harry laughed.

Albus Dumbledore had gotten to his feet.

"Welcome!" he said. "Welcome to a new year at Hogwarts! Before we begin our banquet, I would like to say a few words. And here they are: Nitwit! Blubber! Oddment! Tweak!

"Thank you!"

He sat back down. Everybody clapped and cheered.

"Bloody optimists," Harry muttered.

"See you all later!"

A ghost had come up to the table.

"We're headed to the kitchens. Just follow us, Nick!" one remarked, seeing the odd expression on the ghost's face.

"Ta! Come along Nick, Harry!"

"Where do you two think you're going? You need to be here or you won't get the password!"

"We'll be back for the end of the feast. And really Percy, are you a Prefect? You should have told us..."

With that they were off, Harry and the ghost floating along next to them. Percy glared after their retreating forms.

As soon as they were out of hearing distance, they broke into gales of laughter.

"It's a crazy world," muttered Harry, smirking slightly. But he was in a good position to keep a close eye on Quirrel, learn some magic... and to be amused. For some odd reason, he wouldn't have it any other way.

---

---

*"Where do you two think you're going? You need to be here or you won't get the password!"*

*"We'll be back for the end of the feast. And really Percy, are you a Prefect? You should have told us..."*

*With that they were off, Harry and the ghost floating along next to them. Percy glared after their retreating forms.*

*As soon as they were out of hearing distance, they broke into gales of laughter.*

*"It's a crazy world," muttered Harry, smirking slightly. But he was in a good position to keep a close eye on Quirrel, learn some magic... and to be amused. For some odd reason, he wouldn't have it any other way.*

---

They took a right in the entrance hall, and went down a set of stairs, into a corridor. Unlike the rest of the castle, the paintings hanging from the walls were of fruit. The kitchen, Harry was soon to discover, was hidden behind a painting of a bowl of fruit, with a pear that was apparently ticklish.

Harry stared at it in surprise, as the picture swung forward to reveal a doorway, then followed the twins and Nick through the entrance.

Nick had been giving them quizzical glances most of the way. This, Harry assumed, was probably why he'd been invited along; ghosts weren't going to be fooled.

The twins addressed some rather odd-looking creatures, asking for food to be brought. They were small, with impossibly wide eyes and bat-like ears.

"So," questioned Nick, once they were alone, "what's going on here?"

"They-"

"The rest of the school-"



“Think that he-“ George gestured to Harry.

“Is dead.”

“So we thought it might be amusing-“

“To play along.”

“How long are you planning on having this continue?” Nick gave the twins a glance somewhere between wary and intrigued

“Actually,” Harry cut in, “I would like to continue without anyone finding out, for as long as possible, as in a year, I’m fairly sure I’ll stick around that long, possibly longer.”

Glancing at the startled faces of his companions, he decided it would be best, as these were ‘chivalrous’ people, at least according to the hat, that he’d best give them a reason to keep their mouths shut.

“I have reason to believe I might be in danger if it were to be discovered that I’m still alive.”

Nick gave him a thoughtful look, then nodded.

“I’ll have a word with the other ghosts then.”

He left, floating right through one of the walls.

Fred and George looked at one another, obviously not entirely sure what Harry meant, and shrugged.

“Whatever floats your boat, mate.”

“All the more entertainment for us.”

“Good. I’m assuming you will help me navigate around without getting caught?”

“Of course, all the better for us, anyways.”

“Here’s the rest of the fizzing whizbees.”

They handed him a bag, which he rolled up carefully, and placed in his pocket.

“So, what else?”

“Where should I sleep? I’d like a tour of the school, and a proper explanation of why I’m supposedly dead, that is if you want me to attend classes with you...”

“Of course, of course...”

“Just a second-”

One pulled out an old, yellowed piece of parchment.

“Right, these three Filch knows about...”

“These are blocked off., that should do.”

“Let’s see, we’ll need warming charms-“

“Where are we getting furniture from?”

“House elves.”

“We’re telling them it’s for us?”

“Right-o, brother dear.”

“Harry, we’ll be setting up this passage here for you to stay in.”

“We’ll show you where the rest are later.”

“You can always go invisible when you need to travel unseen-“

“Speaking of which, you need to teach us that trick.”

Harry snorted in amusement, but gave no sign of agreement. The twins, invisible, didn’t sound like a good idea, even if he *did* know how to explain the skill. Everything he’d taught himself had come necessity.

The house-elves, as the twins informed Harry they were called, brought a variety of food, and once none of them were watching, they gave a large portion of this to Harry. He wrapped up several scones in a napkin for later before digging in enthusiastically.

---

They had the secret passage set up nicely within a short amount of time. The house elves had provided a bed, carpet, and sofa, and the twins added a warming charm. It was still colder than the rest of the castle, especially the common rooms and dormitories. It was probably, Harry surmised, because as creative as the twins were, they were still fairly young. He reassured them that it was fine, however. He was used to the cold, and could bundle up in the blankets to keep warm.

After settling in, the twins insisted on taking Harry up to Gryffindor tower, as part of his 'tour,' though they had to return to the Great Hall to walk up with the others, and get the password. Percy still seemed irritated, much to the twins' delight, though, Harry thought, he might just have been annoyed at the sight of them. The other students kept out of their way, for the most part. Hermione and Neville showed him the most interest, walking nearby. He most likely looked as lost as the two of them felt, he thought. For whatever reason, they seemed to find his presence comforting. Ron shot them several looks, both curious and annoyed, but avoided them.

The paintings in the main part of the school were mainly portraits. These were much more articulate than the pear, and could talk, instead of just giggling. Harry was beginning to get the impression that he would have to be *extremely* careful, and make as many friend among the portraits as possible, for it seemed that, at Hogwarts, the walls *did* have eyes. The castle seemed rather foreboding, even more so because there was hardly anywhere you weren't being watched than because of the architecture. It was amazing that a plot like Quirrel's could still manage to go unnoticed. He resolved to learn his way around the castle as well as possible, for it seemed the sort of terrain that could be either an extreme advantage- or an extreme hindrance, depending on how well you knew it. Oddly enough, it seemed, above all, like a place that would be easy to call home.

---

The entrance to Gryffindor tower was guarded by a portrait of a fat lady in a pink silk dress. She asked for the password, and was answered by 'prefect' Percy, before swinging open, and allowing the students to pour into the common room. It was fairly cozy looking, with comfy looking arm-chairs and a warm fire in the fire place. Harry was standing to the side, talking with Neville and Hermione.

One of the professors was waiting for the twins, and quickly drew them to the side. She seemed to not have noticed Harry yet, as he was one of the last to enter. He'd had to meticulously avoid bumping into anyone in order to evade discovery. Hermione managed to fit in a brief synopsis of the events of the night of his parents death, which certainly explained why everyone knew who he was.

He'd supposedly died that day when his aunt had told him to flee the house. The day of the attack.

He hadn't thought much about the Dursleys since. It might seem odd to someone else, but it was true. They'd been horrible to him growing up. Seeing how they treated Dudley, it was obvious. Yet she'd sacrificed everything to get him out of there, for he was sure they hadn't survive. It was in that instant that he'd been able to forgive her, as simple as that, so that he didn't think badly of them, nor morn them, as he'd had little reason to morn them, and no time to think of anything but survival.

The professor, a stern looking woman with her hair pulled firmly back into a bun, was lecturing the twins furiously

"...how dare you!"

"Professor McGonagall-"

"Completely despicable. Do have any idea what that boy has meant to our world? You've no right to joke around with that, there's nothing funny about it!"

Harry stepped out from the corner where he'd been standing.

"Excuse me if I don't care. So I'm their symbol, their martyr, their bag of broken dreams. Why should I give a damn. Tell the world to go

paint their pretty pictures as they please. Do you really believe I was ever anything but a person?"

The entire common had gone silent.

"I'm apologize. Perhaps... ..perhaps you have every right to stir things up a bit, as you see fit."

He nods.

"Thank you, Professor. I wish you a good evening."

"The same to you, Mr Potter... ..goodnight Harry."

She left. Fred and George wore identical startled looks, obviously shocked to have escaped punishment. Harry left only moments later. He was well ready for a goodnight's sleep- most likely a better one than he had in a long time, and had had enough of the Hogwarts population for one day.

---

## ***How We Survive: Chapter 11***

---

*"Excuse me if I don't care. So I'm their symbol, their martyr, their bag of broken dreams. Why should I give a damn. Tell the world to go paint their pretty pictures as they please. Do you really believe I was ever anything but a person?"*

*The entire common had gone silent.*

*"I'm apologize. Perhaps... ..perhaps you have every right to stir things up a bit, as you see fit."*

*He nodded.*

*"Thank you, Professor. I wish you a good evening."*

*"The same to you, Mr Potter... ..goodnight Harry."*

*She left. Fred and George wore identical startled looks, obviously shocked to have escaped punishment. Harry left only moments later. He was well ready for a goodnight's sleep- most likely a better one than he had in a long time, and had had enough of the Hogwarts population for one day.*

---

Harry awoke early the next morning, and untangled himself from the pile of blankets in which he'd cocooned himself. It was dark, and a bit chilly. He concentrated for a moment, becoming invisible before stumbling out the secret passage, grabbing one of the scones he'd brought up from the kitchen and the bag of fizzing whizbees on the way.

Deciding it would be best not to get lost right away, he made his way over to Gryffindor tower. Reaching the entrance, he muttered the password to the portrait.

The Gryffindor common room was still empty. Transitioning into 'semi-visibility,' the boy- or, in all appearances ghost- sat down in an armchair by the fire place. He was waiting for the twins. After all, he needed knowledge of the school's secret passage-ways if he was to get around the school without being detected. From what he'd

observed so far, it would be suspicious for a 'ghost' to be seen wandering around by normal routes, unless he was talking to a student or another living resident. It would also be useful in terms of exploring invisibly, and avoiding running into people.

Hermione Granger was the first downstairs into the common room, carrying a bag full of school books. She started slightly as she noticed the transparent form already seated, gazing into the flickering firelight.

"Err, hi," she began nervously, "I just thought I'd come down and get some studying done before class-"

"Its fine," he assured her, "how many times have you read them so far?"

"I think I have them pretty much memorized..."

"You have no need to fret, then."

"It's just... since neither of my parents are magical, I knew absolutely nothing about what to expect. I want to be prepared for the first day of classes."

"I'm sure you'll do fine."

"Thanks."

She removed a book from her bag, and for the next half hour, she read diligently. Both of them looked up after that when they heard footsteps on the stair. It was Dean Thomas, followed several minutes later by Neville Longbottom.

Harry wasn't surprised in the least. It is hardly uncommon to wake up early when one is nervous or excited about something, and the first day of classes obviously was a big deal to all three.

"So," Dean began awkwardly after they'd been sitting there for nearly a full minute, "what is- err, was- your life like? I mean..."

"I don't see how it matters, since I'm dead," Harry replied contritely, "it's over, after all. Why don't the lot of you tell about your lives?"

"Alright," Dean agreed.

After another moment of silence, he started to speak.

"I guess I'll go first then... I live in London with my family. I have a load of siblings- step-siblings really- we all get on fairly well. I never knew I was a wizard until I got my letter. My parents were both muggles- at least, I think they are," he frowned slightly, "my dad left, so I don't really know for sure."

"I could help you do some research on that sometime, if you'd like," Hermione offered.

"Thanks, but I'd prefer to get used to the wizarding world a bit first, settle in and all. I'll keep the offer in mind, though."

"I didn't know until I'd gotten my letter either," Hermione began, "both my parents are dentists."

"I live with my Grandmother. I grew up knowing about magic, but- well-my family thought for a while I might be a squib. They were so pleased when I got my Hogwarts letter. That's how I got Trevor."

"Well, at least you have a bit more background to start with," Hermione commented encouragingly.

Some of the older students had begun making their way down the stairs, Fred and George among them.

"G'morning mate!"

"Ws'up Harry!"

"Ready for the prankster's tour?"

"Sure, what took you so long?"

"It's called sleep, mate!"

"Well, come on!"



The twins headed towards the portrait hole, Harry following closely behind. They walked for a distance, before Fred and George pulled him into an empty classroom.

"Right, we decided you can borrow this-

"It should help you find your way around-

"And avoid running into people."

They had taken out an old, faded piece of parchment. George tapped it with his wand, muttering:

"I solemnly swear I'm up to no good."

Lines began to appear, spinning out in all directions, twisting and turning here and there in some sort of pattern, which Harry realized moments later was actually a drawing of Hogwarts. Lettering at the top read: 'Messr. Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs proudly present the Mauraders' Map.'

"The Mauraders' Map-

"Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot and Prongs-

"We owe them so much!"

"We're standing here, see?"

Where they were standing there were three dots on the map, labeled 'Fred Weasley,' 'George Weasley,' and 'Harry Potter.'

"There are seven secret passages."

"This one's behind the Whomping Willow, so that's of no use."

"We think Filch knows about these three-

"And these three have caved in."

"This one leads to Hogsmeade-

"The cellar of Honeydukes to be precise."

"Right, that's about it-"

"We're off to breakfast."

"Have fun exploring!"

---

Harry spent the rest of the morning wandering around the school, trying to get accustomed to finding his way around. With the various sets of armor, moving staircases and other oddities, finding out as much as possible about the school was a necessity. It was a rather interesting, rambling castle, built in a variety of styles from different time periods. No doubt it hadn't been built all at once.

I was early afternoon when he ran into Nick (or 'Nearly Headless Nick, as the twins liked to refer to him).

"The other ghosts have agreed to keep quiet for the time being. The Bloody Baron has even said that he could keep Peeves from causing you problems... but he has requested to speak with you."

"That's reasonable."

"He'll meet you in the Great Hall at the end of dinner. I assume you'll be going into the Slytherin dungeons for your discussion."

Harry nodded his assent.

"Thank you, Nick. Tell him I'll be there."

---

Traveling down to the Great Hall to meet the Slytherin ghost, Harry found that he was rather pleased with this turn of events.

He'd wanted a chance to further connections in Hogwarts, and get to know the other houses, so, if he could get off to a good start with the Bloody Baron, this would most likely work to his advantage.

He entered the hall, floating, invisible, then moved to nick some food from the nearest table. He ate quietly, then moved to where the Bloody Baron was seated at the Slytherin table.

"Good evening, Mr Potter."

"Same to you, Baron. I hope I find you well?"

He hoped dearly that he'd managed to mask his surprise at being addressed while invisible. He was floating, so no footsteps sounded in his wake, and the Great Hall was quite loud enough at present that, with all the students in close proximity, it would be impossible to detect his breathing from another's.

The Baron was chuckling darkly.

"I doubt it matters much whether I'm well or not. One day isn't all the different from the next, being dead, it's the world around that changes."

Harry snorted.

"I believe I told some Gryffindor first years something similar when they asked what my life was like."

"How Slytherin of you. Alright then, wait until the students begin to clear the hall," the Baron muttered softly, "then follow me."

---

## Chapter Twelve

---

*The Baron was chuckling darkly.*

*"I doubt it matters much whether I'm well or not. One day isn't all the different from the next, being dead, it's the world around that changes."*

*Harry snorted.*

*"I believe I told some Gryffindor first years something similar when they asked what my life was like."*

*"How Slytherin of you. Alright then, wait until the students begin to clear the hall," the Baron muttered softly, "then follow me."*

---

It didn't take long for the students to begin drifting towards the doors. Harry followed the Bloody Baron out and down a set of stairs towards the far side of the Entrance Hall, down into the dungeons. A small group of Slytherin students who had been walking in front of them stopped in front of a blank wall.

Harry glanced at the Baron, but didn't ask. The Baron was rather intimidating in appearance, covered with silver bloodstains. Not to mention that, first and foremost, it would be fairly numbskulled on Harry's part to ask a question he would undoubtedly know the answer to in a minute, just by observing. The Baron obvious was influential, and he didn't need to start out a bargaining session with making a lousy impression by asking dumb questions.

One of the students towards the front stepped forward and uttered a what was apparently a password of some sort:

*"Noctem Walpurgis."*

The wall opened, revealing what was apparently the Slytherin common room. It was mostly stone, with a darker stone for the floor,

and a variety of elegant rugs and tapestries. It had a fairly low ceiling, and was illuminated by greenish torchlight.

Harry followed the Baron down a corridor, and into an empty side room.

The Baron gave him a calculating glance.

"I take it you need my assistance in maintaining your cover?"

"So I've been told."

"It is, most likely, the truth. Why do you wish to remain hidden, and why should I help you?"

"Tell me first who this 'Peeves' is, and why I need you to keep him in line."

The Slytherin ghost gave him a piercing look, before nodding.

"Peeves is a poltergeist, an indestructible spirit of chaos, as they are defined. He has a passion for wrecking havoc, and could easily cause you *difficulties*. I am known to be the only one who can control him."

Harry thought this over for a moment. Peeves, not being a ghost, might not detect him quite so easily. There was even a chance he could manage to get the troublemaker to think favorably on him on his own. However, it wasn't particularly worth the risk, either. The last thing he needed at the moment was to have his disguise uncovered. He needed to keep his eyes on Quirrel, with as few eyes as possible on himself. No one expected to see the ghosts at Hogwarts all the time, after all. Unlike it's living inhabitants, the ghosts, for the most part, wandered the castle as they pleased, and were paid much less heed.

"I suspect a plot by people who mentioned my name in a way that made me believe they might prove a threat to me. I need to watch a person currently situated at Hogwarts, and being disguised as a ghost works to my advantage."

There was silence for a moment.

"Well?" he asked the Baron expectantly.

The aforementioned ghost raised an eyebrow, a faint smirk upon his lips.

"You've only answered my first question."

"Oh?"

"You've yet to answer why I should help you."

"How 'bout out of the goodness of your heart," Harry retorted sarcastically.

"Do you really think that's likely?"

"Not particularly. What do you want? Anyone you want a prank pulled on? Information on events..."

"Perhaps I'd like to reserve a favor."

"It's never a wise move to agree to something before you know what you're promising."

"True. However, as I could have your cover blown within the day, what position are you in to bargain?"

"As I can leave whenever I please, thus not needing to maintain a disguise any longer, it's hardly in your favor to push a deal with too high a price, since that would leave you right back where you started."

"But you don't want to leave. You need to keep an eye out on certain people."

"How about this: I'll keep you informed on events as per your curiosity, and I'll owe you a favor within reason, I being the judge on what fulfills the requirement. "

Harry watched the Baron with mild apprehension. 'His Bloodiness' gave him an appraising look before answering.

"I accept."

---

The Slytherin first years were seated in a corner of the common room. Harry chose to approach them, invisible, as to not garner they did, they just gazed at him for a moment, unsure of what to say, or whether to address him at all. It was a silver-blond haired aristocrat that addressed him first with a slight, startled sneer.

"Potter."

"That would be my name, correct."

"Perhaps you shouldn't be wandering into this section of the castle then."

Harry raised an eyebrow, smirking slightly.

"First of all, it is unwise to leave nearby territory unknown, and secondly, I wasn't technically wandering, seeing as I was with the Baron, whom I can assure you, knows his way around perfectly well. Tell me, why *shouldn't* I be wandering around these parts?"

"We're not all light supporters here abouts, incase you didn't know."

"I don't recall ever supporting or being supported by anyone but myself, so I think I'll manage just fine, thanks. Not that it matters anyway; you living folk are more than welcome to sort out your squabbles on your own. You are?"

"Draco Malfoy," he answered with obvious pride, "and those are Vincent Crabbe and Gregory Goyle."

After a moments hesitation, the others began to introduce themselves.

"Pansy Parkinson."

"Tracey Davis."

"Blaise Zabini."

"Millicent Bulstrode."

"Daphne Greengrass."

"Pleasure to meet you all. Who's the last one over there?"

He gestured towards a stringy looking first year sitting slightly distanced from the group.

"That's Theodore Nott."

There was no further exclamation, and Harry didn't ask for one. The group had questions of their own, which became apparent a moment later.

"So, how did you do it?"

Draco Malfoy, was, unsurprisingly, the first to speak up.

"Do what?"

It was the Parkinson girl who answered.

"Defeat the Dark Lord, of course."

"Voldemort?"

"Don't say his name!" Daphne hissed nervously. Her sentiment was obviously shared by many others, the Malfoy child in particular.

"What's he going to do, kill me?"

No one had an answer to that. Theodore Nott, Harry noticed, seemed to have taken interest in the conversation, and was watching subtly from where he sat, apparently waiting to see what Harry would say next.

"Do any of you remember anything from when you were one?" Harry asked.

"Well, no..."



"Nor do I remember how I defeated Voldemort-" Harry looked around to see flinches at the name, "nor am I even sure I would understand it were I able to remember."

"You don't remember *anything*?" Pansy's expression showed obvious disappointment.

"I recall screaming, a flash of green light, and high pitched laughter, but that's it."

"*Avada Kedevera*, the killing curse, produces green light..." Draco muttered, then blinked as he processed the rest of the statement. "*High pitched* laughter?"

"Quite clearly."

Tracey snorted in amusement. Harry could see Theodore smirking at the Malfoy heir's expression from the corner where he sat.

"What about the fire?" Malfoy shot back, obviously trying to get attention off himself, and into an area less comfortable for the obviously amused boy-who-lived-and supposedly-died. "Didn't get away quite as easily from that, did you? But I bet you can remember..."

Silence had settled over the immediate vicinity upon this statement. Harry shrugged.

"There was an attack. I stayed hidden in my cupboard-"

"Your cupboard?"

"I lived in a cupboard under the stairs. The intruders didn't find me- but the fire did."

Harry watched their faces closely, making sure no one doubted this line of events. Noticing one of the older students heading for the door, he decided that it was probably best to leave while he had the chance, as he needed to have someone else open the door in order to exit inconspicuously.

"I guess I'll leave you lot to your studies then. See you around."

With that, he turned invisible. It was then that he realized with a start that the effects of the fizzing whizbees had worn off. If he walked across the room, they would hear his footsteps. Closing his eyes, he concentrated on how it felt to be under the effects of the odd candies, and how important it was that his presence not be given away. Moments later, he was hovering above the chair where he'd been sitting. Relieved, he floated quickly toward the exit, following the older student out into the corridor.

---

When he entered the Gryffindor common room, hoping to discuss plans for attending classes with the twins, he found Hermione Granger sitting near the fire, a pile of books spread out in front of her. Making himself visible right next to the wall, he floated over.

"So, how was your first day of classes."

She looked up, and beamed. She obviously wasn't paid much heed by her classmates, and welcomed the greeting.

"Wonderful. We saw all sorts of magic, and learned a lot of new things. I'm top of all my classes so far."

She looked at him for a moment, as if wondering what to say, then asked cautiously:

"What's it like to be a ghost?"

"Different, I guess. You're not really part of events, more of a spectator, floating around instead of walking... It's hard to describe. I guess I'm used to it, and in some ways I never really had much of a chance to see what it was like to live."

She gave him a sympathetic look.

"I suppose there are probably other differences too."

"Like temperature," she grumbled ruefully, "one of the other ghosts walked right through me today. It's so cold! You all just *radiate* cold."

"Really? I wonder why," he remarked, watching her expression carefully. "Are there any spells with similar effects we could compare it to? Maybe that could help us figure it out."

Seeing her interested expression, he knew he'd played his cards right.

"Brilliant! I'll check the library, and tell you if I find anything."

---

## Chapter Thirteen

---

*"Different, I guess. You're not really part of events, more of a spectator, floating around instead of walking... It's hard to describe. I guess I'm used to it, and in some ways I never really had much of a chance to see what it was like to live."*

*She gave him a sympathetic look.*

*"I suppose there are probably other differences too."*

*"Like temperature," she grumbled ruefully, "one of the other ghosts walked right through me today. It's so cold! You all just radiate cold."*

*"Really? I wonder why," he remarked, watching her expression carefully. "Are there any spells with similar effects we could compare it to? Maybe that could help us figure it out."*

*Seeing her interested expression, he knew he'd played his cards right.*

*"Brilliant! I'll check the library, and tell you if I find anything."*

---

The Weasley twins found Harry not long after Hermione left, as they entered the common room and headed to their favorite plotting corner.

"Harry!"

"There you are, mate!"

"So, what's the plan?" Harry asked, once they'd settled on the floor near the fire, Fred and George sitting so that they blocked Harry from view, for the most part.

"Well," began Fred, slipping Harry a parcel of food from the kitchens, "we need to drag you into our classes one of these days."

"Hmm, yes, and we'll have to make sure to shock them as much as possible-"

"Right you are, mate. So when do you think would have the most effect?"

"Perhaps about a week into classes?" Harry suggested.

"That'd be about right, give people time to get into a routine, so they can be properly, shall we say, *surprised*?"

"Sounds good to me, brother mine. Now Harry-"

"What'll you be up to 'till then?"

"Is that any of your business?"

"Easy there, mate, I was just wondering if you needed anything-"

"Have enough food, and you won't want to be too behind."

"What?" Harry queried.

"For when they find out," Fred clarified.

"They're bound to find out eventually-"

"And as it's looking like it'll take awhile-"

"You're going to be a good deal behind your year mates-"

"If we don't teach you anything."

They were under the assumption, Harry noted, that he was going to stay until he was discovered, and that once he was discovered, he would attend school here. He decided it would be best not to dissolution them. If he left at the end of this year, which was quite possible, he wouldn't have to deal with them, and they would most likely be suspicious if they knew he didn't intend to attend school here.

"You needn't worry, I'm sure *Hermione* will be quite willing to teach me the theory. I'll ask."

George snorted.

"You do that. Since you aren't interesting in a chance to learn the practical-"

"It's not exactly possible at this point."

"Oh, come on mate, you can practice using our wands-"

"We'll help you practice somewhere out of the way."

"Alright." Harry agreed. Despite his reluctance to allow the twins another role in his life, he could benefit from learning more spells.

"That's settled then."

---

As Harry had predicted, Hermione was quite happy to be of help.

"Of course! Everyone deserves a chance to learn, and you probably don't have much to do, being a ghost and all," she noted, "Besides, it'll help me review the material, and make sure I've learnt everything I need to. Make sure to ask questions on anything that's unclear. That way, I'll know if I missed information."

Within very little time, Harry came to highly doubt that it was possible for her *not* to know the text books by heart. However, since as far as she knew, he'd never have to perform the spells, she also added in other bits of information, which made his evenings a bit more interesting. Not only would she talk about what she would concentrate on to make a spell work, and what could make it go wrong, but she would also tell him about what mistakes other students made, or when they goofed off in class, or anything else she found amusing or interesting. It was, Harry thought, most likely because she was lonely, and also, as there was a sort of separation between him and the rest of the world, she found him easier to confide in.

*'Note to self: never trust anyone so easily, especially for such reasons.'*

"Some of the classes are a great deal more complicated than most students seem to think," Hermione was saying, "take potions, for

example, you had to know a great deal of facts from Herbology, so you would know how different ingredients would interact. Apparently, according to the research I've been doing," she had a rather annoyed expression at this point, presumably due to the professor's lack of helpfulness, "depending on conditions such as temperature, humidity, and freshness of ingredients, it might require slightly different amounts of time, and proportions of various components. Correctly brewed potions can only be accomplished with knowledge as well as careful observation of the potion..."

She broke off the lecture with a sigh, slamming the book shut.

"I just wish he'd give us a chance. He's one of the worlds best potions masters, and won't even really try teaching us before assuming that we're hopeless."

"You're doing great, Hermione. You're obviously not hopeless, and as he doesn't seem to be very respectful to anyone, you've no need to worry."

Harry replied, trying to calm her down a little. Hermione, like many young children, had the tendency to feel like she had to be perfect at everything. Being only eleven, this was less than surprising. She was young enough to put a bit of excess significance on her studies, and combining this with the fascination with magic of someone new to the wizarding world, could be a tad bit excessive.

Despite being only eleven himself, Harry had experienced enough to not try and live his life to please others, or to believe, as he had as a small child, that magic could fix everything.

"It's not just that," she confessed, gazing downward, "It's just- oh, never mind."

"What?"

"It's none of your business!" she snapped.

"I'm sorry," she whispered a moment later, "it's been... a long day. We'll continue this tomorrow."

She gathered up her books, and moments later she disappeared up the steps into the girls dormitory.

---

Fred and George had decided to wait until Hermione had filled him in on more of the theory to have Harry try performing the spells, since it would be even more difficult than usual, trying to learn with another wizard's wand. The extra challenge, Harry thought, would probably be good for his skills in the long run.

Harry was, for the time being, however, left with a great deal of free time on his hands for until Fred and George thought it time to take him to scare their professors and classmates.

Within a few days, Harry knew the castle and its secret passageways fairly well. He had even taken to wandering the Hogwarts grounds, invisible, as he'd never seen any of the real ghosts hanging around out there.

The weather was quite nice today, almost seeming to be late summer instead of early fall. A cool breeze gently ruffled the water in the lake, and swayed the blades of grass several inches below his feet. The students were still inside in their classes, and the grounds were pleasantly quiet.

He wandered towards the edge of the forest. Moments later, the door of the cabin nearby swung open. It was the man who'd led the first years from the platform.

The dog had started to bark.

"Wha's wrong, Fang?" the man asked, glancing around in bemusement. "There's no one anywhere near 'ere. C'mon..."

The dog was running right towards him, barking. Harry fled, floating higher as he moved towards the castle. He'd have to be a bit more careful, because had anyone else been there, it would only have taken one spell shot in the direction 'Fang' had been barking for him to have been caught.

---



## **Chapter Fourteen**

---

*"Wha's wrong, Fang?" the man asked, glancing around in bemusement. "There's no one anywhere near 'ere. C'mon..."*

*The dog was running right towards him, barking. Harry fled, floating higher as he moved towards the castle. He'd have to be a bit more careful,*

*because had anyone else been there, it would only have taken one spell shot in the direction 'Fang' had been barking for him to have been caught.*

---

After four nights of theory with Hermione, and three days before Fred and George planned to bring him in to disrupt- er, *attend* their classes, Harry finally got to attempt some magic- in the sense of actually performing it. He was quite pleased with the idea, as he headed up to an empty classroom where he was to greet the twins. It would normally be considered a bit risky, but they had the door lock behind them, and had convinced Nick to stand watch.

"Right," commented Fred, moments after Harry had joined them, "we were thinking we'd start with Transfiguration."

"You don't do much first day of charms, after all, so we won't either, this being your first sort-of-lesson-"

"Don't do much in DADA either, ever, come to think of it, with the way Quirrel teaches-"

"And we didn't think it'd be practical to steal plants from the greenhouses-"

"We'd have to keep them somewhere-"

"So they'd be more of a discovery risk than they're worth."

"We'll have you try a potion right after some Transfiguration practice."

"Alright," Harry agreed.

George demonstrated a bit of transfiguration, turning a bottle of ink into a mouse and back with practice ease. Harry however, was only to try turning a match into a needle.

"We thought it'd be best to stick to the curriculum for now," Fred confided, "never been much good at teaching anyway, and it'll make sure you know the stuff your age-group is learning."

Harry nodded, and accepted the wand they handed him, then turned to the match. He pointed the wand at it, and tried to visualize how it would look as a needle. A half-hour later, it remained completely unchanged.

"Maybe it's because-"

"You haven't used a wand before. Try-"

"To concentrate on channeling magic-"

"Through the wand."

Harry tried. He closed his eyes, and focused on the feel of the pulse of energy, then pushed some of the magic through the wand, and towards the needle.

"Well?" asked Harry, not sure he wanted to look quite yet.

"It's... not quite the same as it was before..." commented George, who was obviously attempting to be tactful, and, if Harry wasn't mistaken, trying not to laugh.

Harry slowly opened his eyes, not particularly anxious to see the results of his latest transfiguration attempt. The match was still a match. But it seemed to be glowing.

"Not that it looks any more like a needle, either." Fred observed.

"So *now* he tells me," Harry grumbled.

He reached down in picked it up to examine it, only to drop it a second later.

"I wasn't aware that contact with failed transfiguration attempts could give you shocks," Harry commented wryly.

"Well, you got the energy down-

"The only problem being the complete lack of transfiguration."

"Just keep trying," George instructed, watching lazily.

Harry went back to his attempts, again. Glancing out of the corner of his eye, he could see that the twins were plotting pranks again. They probably had been the entire time. He turned his attention back to the match, and tried again, flicking his wand sharply in its direction. *Stupid match, if only it would just-*

But at that moment, his thoughts were interrupted, or perhaps fulfilled, as the match burst violently into flame.

The twins looked up from whatever they were plotting, and their expressions quickly shifted from vague curiosity to obvious amusement.

Harry tossed the wand in their general direction, and gave him his best imitation *glare a la Severus Snape* (which he'd seen Snape use on Mr. Ron Weasley on his first day at Hogwarts)

"Well," said George after a moment of being torn between laughter and backing away nervously, "perhaps we should call it a day. No need to fret though, mate. Most don't get any results on their first try-" seeing Harry's irritated look, he corrected himself hurriedly, "first lesson, I mean."

"And you *got* results," added Fred cheerily, "You got it to glow *and* burst into flames!"

"Results involving fire or explosions-"

"Or both," cut in Fred.

"Or both, can be highly useful," confided George in a loud whisper. The sincerity of his statement, Harry mused, probably would have

sent a good many Hufflepuffs into a panic. Actually, it probably would do the same for anyone unfortunate enough to share their potions class. And a large percentage of those vulnerable to their pranks...

"On to potions, then," concluded Fred, "once you understand them properly, you can create lovely explosions."

Harry glanced from one to the other, and rolled his eyes.

---

"Harry!"

Harry was sitting by the fire in the Gryffindor common room, waiting for Hermione to arrive for his theory lesson, when he heard her shout.

"I found it!"

"What?"

"A spell that causes objects to radiate cold, like sort of like ghosts do, see?"

She gestured to a rather heavy-looking volume she was holding, entitled Basic Spells for Household Healing.

"Healing?"

"Yes. I'm not sure why I didn't think of it. I had to ask Madame Pince if she knew of any spells to cause things to radiate cold, and she suggested I check. Look here. '*The frigus genero charm is generally used on cloths to help cool down flu patients with fevers. It radiates cold from one side of the cloth, so that the patient can be cooled without discomfort to others present in the room. It is used largely for the reason that it is impossible to place such a spell on the patients directly, being the opposite of body heat, which is a vital sign of life.*' I think it probably means that ghosts give off cold because it's the opposite of body heat, so it's a sign of death. It's sort of... reverse, as far as I can tell."

Harry gave her an encouraging smile.

"Your talents for research and logic are amazing. It seems a highly likely possibility to me."

Harry had the twins cast the charm on his clothes later that evening, so that he would seem to radiate cold. It would most likely be extremely important if he was to spend time in close proximity with other students.

---

By the lesson three nights later- the night before he would invade the twins' classes- Harry had found that, thanks to Hermione's thorough review of the theory needed for each of the beginning potions, that subject gave him little trouble. Although he was hardly perfect, his potions were decent enough, and improving as he got the hang of it. The twins were delighted. Potions was, apparently, quite good for practical jokes and explosions. As far as they were concerned, the more you understood about the properties of ingredients, the more spectacular explosions you could create. For some reason, Harry thought the resident potion master might be of a slightly different opinion on the matter.

Transfiguration- what he was working on now- was a different matter. He stared at the current match- which was, at least, neither glowing, shocking people, bursting into flames, or exploding. It was rather tempting just to stop for the night. Sighing as he made yet another attempt, he mentally reminded himself of all the reasons he wanted to learn this- and need to learn. Magic could definitely be an advantage, and if he ran in to trouble with Quirrel, or this 'Voldemort' person (the guy with the high voice), it would be best to be equipped with more skills than he had now. Looking down at the match, he blinked, for it wasn't quite a match anymore. It had gone slightly silvery, and was a bit pointy at one end. Sure, it wasn't quite a needle yet, but he was getting there, and at least now he had a bit more of a feel for what this sort of magical task felt like.

---

The day, for Professor Minerva McGonagall, had begun, more or less, the same as any other. Of course, having to teach the Weasley twins was always something to beware of, but, for the moment, they were sitting quietly, briskly taking notes on the lecture she was giving.

Which was why she was worried. The twins didn't *always* make trouble, but for them to be behaving perfectly could only mean trouble. Nevertheless, it wasn't until halfway through her lecture that something odd happened. Something caught her eye, and she looked up. Harry Potter- or rather, his ghost- had just floated through the wall, into the classroom. She paused in mid-sentence in surprise, for not only had she not gotten used to having his ghost at Hogwarts, only having seen him as such once before, but also, never before had a ghost ever entered her room during class.

The ghost boy spoke up, seeing all the eyes on him. "Good morning, Professor. I... I'd hoped I might be able to come in and watch classes every so once and a while, since I never got a chance to learn much," he gave her a sheepish smile, "and I haven't got much else to do, given the circumstances."

Although she *knew* that this was probably what the twins had been looking forward to, she couldn't see the harm in him staying. What a well mannered child...

"Of course you may, Mr. Potter."

She shot the twins a look, however. She had no doubt whatsoever that the Weasley twins had specifically set it up so that it would interrupt her lecture. She'd tell them at the end of class to stay after.

---

As far as Fred and George Weasley were concerned, things were going quite smoothly. Completely disrupting class, and distracting everyone present for its duration while getting away scotch free was quite an achievement. They weren't out of there yet, of course, but still...

Harry was enjoying himself as well. He'd slipped in, invisible, behind Fred and George, and remanded by the wall until around half way through the lecture, at which point he'd become visible- or rather, transparent- and floated forward. It was actually mildly interesting to watch the class, partially because the results of the various transfiguration attempts were amusing, and partially because of their reactions to his presence. He hadn't spent much time with large

groups of people within a few years of his age before, and he found the experience quite entertaining.

The professor was standing nearby, keeping an eye on the class as they practiced. At the planned time, a few minutes before the bell, Harry approached her.

"Thank you for allowing me to observe your class, Professor. Transfiguration seems to be a very interesting branch of magic."

She smiled warmly at him.

"I certainly find it to be. It is one of the more difficult branches as well, being one of the more complex."

"I see. It seems worth the effort though. There seem to be a good deal of different levels of difficulty as well. What aspects make some assignments more difficult than others?"

"Well, one of the most basic is how different the object you start with is from your finished product. It's much harder to transform if there is a large size difference. In essence, the more details you need to change, the harder it is. We start out by transforming matches into needles, as both are relatively simple objects of a similar size."

Harry nodded.

"That makes sense. What's the hardest form?"

"That would be the animagus transfiguration. It is the art of transforming oneself into another creature and back."

"Really? That's possible? Amazing!" Harry was interested. Really. Though he was definitely exaggerating enthusiasm...

"Quite. I am an animagus myself, actually."

"Could you demonstrate? That is, if it isn't too much trouble-"

"Of course not."

Abruptly, she transformed into a tabby cat, with rectangular markings around the eyes.

The bell rang.

She transformed back. The students were dashing for the door.

"Fascinating," commented Harry, "I wish I had lived long enough to have a chance to learn..."

The sadness in his voice, which was, unbeknownst to Minerva, completely fake, managed to distract her for the moment needed to get most of the students, including Fred and George, out of the room.

"Well," Harry concluded, "I suppose I had better be going, before I manage to disrupt your next class as well."

He gave her a sad smile.

"Thanks for everything," Harry murmured, before floating after the last students out the door.

The plan had gone quite smoothly. Harry had distracted Professor McGonagall so that she hadn't gotten around to assigning homework before the bell rang. Fred and George had gotten away without reprimand. And, of course the next transfiguration class *would* be disrupted, courtesy of the fireworks Fred and George had set up while the esteemed professor was distracted. They would, naturally, get in trouble for the last bit, but they didn't particularly care. That was one of the things about the twins- they liked getting credit for their "achievements."

---



---

## Chapter Fifteen

---

*The plan had gone quite smoothly. Harry had distracted Professor McGonagall so that she hadn't gotten around to assigning homework before the bell rang. Fred and George had gotten away without reprimand. And, of course the next transfiguration class would be disrupted, courtesy of the fireworks Fred and George had set up while the esteemed professor was distracted. They would, naturally, get in trouble for the last bit, but they didn't particularly care. That was one of the things about the twins- they liked getting credit for their "achievements."*

---

Most of the rest of the classes went fairly uneventfully, with a few exceptions- such as Professor Flitwick falling off his stack of books in surprise at Harry's appearance. Most of the students were still a bit too surprised to consider talking to Harry yet. Potions, however, taught by Professor Snape, and taken with the Slytherins, didn't run nearly so smoothly.

Snape obviously had plenty of ideas and memories for the ghost-boy. Upon seeing his presence, he got that rather odd, startled look he'd had the day in the Great Hall, and snapped:

"I've never had ghosts attend classes before, Potter, and I've no reason to allow one to now, *celebrity* or not."

"Your *point*, sir?" Harry remarked, eyebrows raised. There was a slight flash in his eyes as well, though not enough for anyone to notice.

"Get. Out. NOW!" Snape snarled.

"Whatever you say, mate-"

"I'm sure we can find some other fine room to make things explode."

The twins headed towards the door, Harry floating behind them. They rather wondered, on their way out, if Snape knew that this meant war...

---

It was later that day that Harry made his way down to the Slytherin dungeons once more to look for the Bloody Baron. If this 'Peeves' was as much trouble as the Slytherin ghost claimed, Harry thought he'd rather like an introduction.

Upon entering behind a group of third years, he remained invisible for a moment to glance about. It seemed, to his misfortune, that he was the only one haunting the common room at the moment. The Malfoy heir, however, was present.

He glided over, appearing across from the blond-haired boy, and taking a seat in a near by chair.

Seeing a flicker of movement out of the corner of his eye, Malfoy glanced up from whatever he was reading.

"Oh, it's you."

"I suppose you're probably right, but then again, one never can tell..."

Malfoy snorted, before glancing back down.

"How odd..." he muttered softly.

"What's odd?" inquired Harry, keeping the interest in his voice carefully veiled.

"*Everything* this year."

"Such as?" Persisted Harry, raising an eyebrow at the blond.

Malfoy glared.

"Don't you know *anything* Potter? But then, I don't suppose you even read the *Prophet*, since you're only a ghost, after all. They ought to call you the boy-who-died now, don't you think?"

"*Tact*, Malfoy. One would think a Slytherin such as your self would have the wit to charm people when it's to their advantage. No need to make unnecessary enemies. Are you sure you've got the cunning, or did you merely lack any other traits?"

"You know, you're without a doubt one of the most interesting people at Hogwarts, and you're just a ghost. How *pathetic*."

Harry rolled his eyes.

"You know Malfoy, you still need some practice in being tactful..."

---

The article Draco Malfoy had been reading was, actually, rather startling. As he informed Harry several minutes *after* said boy-who-lived inquired on what eccentricity of events he'd been muttering about, someone had broken into Gringotts bank- without getting caught. The vault had been, apparently, emptied earlier that same day.

Harry found this information rather interesting. It could, of course, be completely unconnected to Quirrel- but Harry didn't think there was much chance of it being a coincidence. It was rather likely that the vault's contents had been 'the stone' he'd heard them discussing- and this Voldie-what-it's was probably one of the only people capable of breaking into the bank. The security must be good, since it had never been successfully broken into before, and according to Draco, it had been around for centuries.

The students were making their way down to the Great Hall for dinner. Harry followed, knowing His Bloodiness was sure to be there.

The hall was packed, as usual. Harry floated over, taking a seat by the Bloody Baron. He wouldn't eat now, of course. He only took food from the tables invisible, and the twins would bring him another package of food tonight, which would last him a while.

The Baron was watching him intently.

"So, what are you up to this time?"

"Who, me?" Harry smirked innocently at him. Or tried to. Some things, unfortunately, just aren't possible to pull off convincingly...

"I do believe it was quite apparent that you are the individual I was addressing. And incase you hadn't noticed, dodging questions won't get you anywhere with me."

"Yeah, yeah. I was just hoping you might introduce me to this... Peeves person you mentioned."

"And why should I want to do that?"

"To prove that he's as, shall we say, problematic as you claim."

"Sounds like an addition favor to me, Potter."

"We had a bargain. You said I needed your help, especially for purposes of controlling this... 'Peeves.' I'm just asking for a bit of proof that I couldn't handle things on my own."

His Bloodiness merely raised an eyebrow.

Harry sighed.

"You *do* want me to stop Quirrel, and protect the school, don't you? ...Oh come on, surely you could use a bit of entertainment?"

"Alright. What do you have planned?"

---

"You have the nerve to just come up here and hang out in the Gryffindor common room as if nothing happened?"

Ronald Weasley was not, Harry deducted, in good mood.

"And what exactly, pray tell, has happened?"

"You sat at the *Slytherin* table. With the Slytherins!"

"You know, ickle-Ronniekins," Fred cut in, "If he was at the Slytherin table-"

"It stands to reason that there were Slytherins there."

Ron was apparently not amused.

"In case you hadn't noticed, I don't belong to any house. The ghosts have always associated with one another. Gryffindor does not own me, and I had a few things to discuss with the Bloody Baron."

Ronald Weasley rather had to give up, and deal with it. After all, none of his house mates supported him on this point. Even his brothers, whom, he suspected, probably had some idea what the boy-who-lived had needed to talk to the Baron about.

---

The week of Professor Severus Snape had gone rapidly down hill. A certain poltergeist had been specifically targeting him for days, something that had never happened before, considering he was Head of Slytherin house. The Bloody Baron had completely refused to assist him, and he was getting the rather nervous feeling that this had something to do with Hogwarts's new resident ghost. He could probably have asked Dumbledore for help, but, curse the man, he'd probably support the poltergeist if he knew what was going on.

His current class, double potions with the third year Gryffindors and Slytherins, contained, unfortunately, the Weasley twins. He'd spent most of the class so far keeping a close eye on them. Their potion was decisively off, though nothing in danger of exploding at the moment- he'd make them test it at the end of class.

Moments later, the Weasley twins walked up towards his desk.

"Sir-"

"We think there may be something wrong with our potion."

He glared at them.

"Let's see it then, and if there is, you'll be the first to test your potion."

He strode swiftly down the room, towards the cauldron at which the twins had been working, Fred and George following behind him.

Moments later, as he approached the caldron, it exploded, botched potion splattering over everything- including Snape.

Glaring, he cleaned up the splattered potion with a flick of his wand. The effects of the potion, however, remained. Everywhere the potion had touched was now tie-died. A look that, on Professor Severus Snape, had never been seen before.

"WEASLEY!"

"Which one-"

"Are you talking to?"

"Both of you, detention and-"

"Professor, we were still on our way back from walking up to talk to you when it exploded. In fact-"

"You were closer to it then we were."

"I know you did it," he hissed.

But he couldn't prove it.

He took it up with Professor McGonagall later that day.

"If your that confident in their potions skills that you think they could have set it up ahead of time to explode at a specific time, with specific effects, then perhaps you should give them private lessons. It is, after all the duty of a Professor to nurture the talents of their students."

He didn't bring it up again after that.

---

Potions class was canceled for the rest of that day, as well as the two that followed. Professor Snape regretted not having taken samples of the potion before cleaning it up, because it would have made reversing it much easier. Fred and George thanked Peeves

immensely for his assistance, despite that he'd done so at the Baron's request, even giving him several packages of dung-bombs, water balloons, and filibuster fireworks.

When Potions classes began again, Professor Snape sincerely hoped things would be back to normal. Peeves had left him alone so far that day, but the Weasley twins class was next.

Upon entering the classroom, everything seemed, fairly normal. The students were all sitting in their places, notes out, ingredients organized. In fact, everyone was being so perfectly behaved that he knew at once that something was wrong.

The Bloody Baron was seated at the front of the room.

"Good morning, Professor Snape. I decided I would like to sit in on one of your potions classes."

Snape just stood there for a moment, staring at the Slytherin ghost.

The Baron raised an eyebrow at him challengingly. Snape took a deep breath, and looking strait at the Baron, finally spoke.

"Fine."

He knew then, no matter how uncomfortable it made him, he would have to deal with the Potter ghost-child attending his class.

---

---

## **Chapter Sixteen**

---

*"Good morning, Professor Snape. I decided I would like to sit in on one of your potions classes."*

*Snape just stood there for a moment, staring at the Slytherin ghost.*

*The Baron raised an eyebrow at him challengingly. Snape took a deep breath, and looking strait at the Baron, finally spoke.*

*"Fine."*

*He knew then, no matter how uncomfortable it made him, he would have to deal with the Potter ghost-child attending his class.*

---

Harry had entered the Gryffindor common room that evening as usual, for theory with Hermione. She was sitting in an armchair, waiting for him.

Neville was sitting in a corner nearby. Most of the other first years were chattering about 'Quidditch..'. They were listening to Ronald Weasley (who was relishing his bit of seldom found attention,) and Seamus Finnigan telling stories of experiences flying on broomsticks.

"I'm supposed to start flying lessons Thursday," Hermione informed him at when he reached her.

"You don't sound too thrilled," Harry remarked. He sat down in an empty chair near by and waited for her to continue.

"I'm not. I've looked up everything I can find on flying, but I'm not sure it'll be enough, and-"

"Calm down. I'm sure Madame Hooch will give you plenty of tips."



“But this is *flying*. From what I’ve found, it’d be so much easier to mess up, so many injuries are possible and-“

“Floating isn’t too bad. I can’t imagine flying would be that dreadful.”

“You can’t fall and get hurt.”

“True, but in both you control where you’re going, without being anchored to the ground.”

“Only if you manage to fly properly,” she muttered skeptically.

“Let’s just try and put it in perspective. Compare it to, say, learning to drive. There’s only so much you can learn from books when you’re learning to drive a car, and it’s usually easier to learn by having someone show you what you need to do. Flying, though, you’ll be at the Quidditch pitch, which is cleared out especially for flying, and you’ll be above most things you could potentially crash into. It’s a good deal simpler than with a car, too, from the look of it, at least for transportation purposes, and you’ll be able to feel the wind.”

“I’ll still have to deal with heights, as well as the Slytherins. It did help a bit though, thanks.”

“You’ll do better than me, at any rate,” commented Neville from the corner.

“Why do you say that, Neville?” asked Hermione, “Haven’t you ever flown?”

“No,” he replied glumly, “Gran never let me near one. She says I’m clumsy enough on the ground. I’ve enough classes to do miserably at without this.”

“Like what?” asked Harry, who’d never seen Neville in any of his classes.

“*Everything*... ..well, I guess I’m alright at Herbology, but I’m dreadful at Potions. I always manage to bungle them up some how. I managed to *melt* a cauldron the very first class.”

“If you’d like, perhaps I could start going to your potions class instead of the twins. I could keep an eye on the directions for you, and help explain the parts you have trouble with.”

“Would you really?”

“Of course. I don’t have anything else I have to do.”

“Thanks!” Neville replied, sounding a bit relieved. “Um, I was just wondering... what’s a car?”

Hermione stared at him for a moment.

“You must have seen one before, on the way to the Platform...”

Neville shook his head. “Gran’s always worried I’ll get hurt. We took a port-key strait to the Platform.”

Getting over her shock, Hermione threw herself into a rather thorough explanation of different types of Muggle transportation, and ended up having to answer a good many questions on the topic from Neville-why Muggles used so many different ways of transportation, whether they were dangerous, and what types were used for what purposes.

“It’s amazing how different things are here,” muttered Hermione, “so many little things that one takes for granted. Seeing the ghosts of all the people who’ve died is odd enough.”

“Not everyone becomes a ghost,”corrected Neville.

Hermione frowned.

“Why’s that? I mean, what determines who becomes a ghost, and who doesn’t?”

“I’m not sure.”

Moments later, one of the other first year boys walked over towards them.

"Mind if I hang out over here?" asked Dean Thomas. "I'm getting tired of hearing Seamus and Ron chattering about Quidditch. The stories were interesting mind you, the *first* time the told them..."

Harry snorted. "I can see your point," he replied, glancing over to where Ronald Weasley was repeating a story of how he almost hit a hang glider to anyone who'd listen.

Hermione nodded. "Your welcome to join us."

"Thanks. I didn't think I could stand another moment over there, especially with Ron repeatedly trying to say Quidditch is better than football (called soccer in the U.S., to anyone who's confused)," replied Dean, rolling his eyes.

"How does he figure that?" asked Hermione. "Has he ever seen a game of soccer, or played one?"

"No," answered Dean, "he says that no game with only one ball, where no one is allowed to fly could possibly be exciting."

"Didn't it ever cross his mind that muggles *can't* fly? It has very little to do with not being allowed to."

"Apparently not. Say, if he brings it up again, any chance you lot would help my side of the argument?" asked Dean jokingly.

"We could try, though since I don't know anything about Quidditch, my arguments would likely be a bit lacking," said Hermione, smiling.

"Maybe someday we could convince Dumbledore to hold a soccer tournament," suggested Harry, who'd been finding the conversation rather amusing..

"It'd have to be mandatory for it to work," murmured Neville.

At the idea of Ron Weasley, and quite a few others who would undoubtedly protest- such as Percy Weasley and Draco Malfoy- the lot of them burst into laughter. They got quite a few odd glances for that- but at least it interrupted the Quidditch discussion that had been taking place on the other side of the room.

---

“Potter.”

“That was my last name in life, yes.”

“Five points from Gryffindor for your cheek, Potter. What are you doing in this class?”

“Last I checked, *Severus Snape*, you have no authority over me, nor was I ever sorted into Gryffindor. Neville mentioned he’d been having some trouble with potions, so I decided to hang around and see if I could reduce the amount of cauldrons being destroyed, since you cannot spend all class tutoring him.”

“Fine. However, as it wouldn’t be fair for Mr. Longbottom to have an advantage over the rest of the class, your *tutelage* will be instead of his working with a partner.”

Neville nodded numbly.

“I have no problem with that, Professor. I’m sure the added challenge will only help him learn.”

Snape nodded grudgingly.

“Get to work!”

The potions class, much to the surprise of most, went smoother than usual. Harry, who’d gone over the theory with Hermione already, instructed the clumsy boy on when to add which ingredients, and discussed the various properties of the herbs in it, which made more sense to Neville than the rest. Neville almost always still put things in at not quite the right time, but the main problem was that he would put in a bit more or less of the ingredients than he was supposed to. Once he bumped a jar over so that half its contents fell into the cauldron. Harry managed to tell him what ingredients to put in more of to stabilize it. The potion was still mediocre at best, but was not, at least a complete catastrophe.

---

The flying lessons, as Harry found out later, did *not* go very well. Neville Longbottom had fallen off his broom, and ended up with a broken wrist. Hermione had apparently managed pretty well, however.

“The flying part was actually pretty fun,” Hermione admitted to him that evening, “though it made me rather nervous. I don’t think I’ll mind it after a bit more practice, but I doubt I’ll ever be secure enough to try and play games at the same time.”

At least the start of flying lessons had stopped the constant bragging and story exchange about flying experiences. The Halloween feast soon became the main topic of conversation.

---

Upon entering the Great Hall, Harry found that it had been decorated rather uniquely for the occasion. Live bats fluttered around the hall, causing the candle light to waver eerily.

Pansy was gossiping delightedly to Millicent Bulstrode and Ijk that ‘Granger’ was sobbing in the girl’s bathroom. Harry had other things to worry about at the moment. Quirrel was missing from the head table. Harry, who was observing the hall from a seat by the Baron, was about to go look for him when he burst into the hall.

“Troll- in the dungeons- thought you ought to know.”

He promptly sank to the floor in what appeared to be a dead faint.

It took several firecrackers- purple firecrackers- exploding from Dumbledore’s wand to stem the chaos that followed.

“Prefects, lead your Houses back to the dormitories immediately!”

Crowds of students were jostling to exit the hall.

“Baron,” Harry whispered sharply, “I’ll cover Quirrel. Send Peeves to tell the twins about Hermione.”

The Baron was not arguing, for once. Cold silver eyes held only strategy instead of their usual smirking, cynical humor. He nodded.

“I’m heading to the third-floor corridor. I’ll inform Peeves on the way.”

---

Quirrel, Harry was soon entirely sure, had set up the whole thing. As soon as the students and other teachers had swept out of the hall, he got up and left, heading for the third floor.

Harry followed. As it turned out, Snape had also gone to head off Quirrel. His leg was injured by the time he confronted Quirrel in front of the corridor entrance. Satisfied that Snape had both eyes on the man, and that the Baron was also there to keep an eye out, and could fill him in later, he turned towards the girls bathroom, hoping the Weasley twins would have made it there by now.

He found, upon reaching his destination, that he was out of luck.

The troll had Hermione trapped, the stall she’d tried to hide in completely smashed. He arrived just in time to see the thing lift her up with the ease of a child lifting a doll, and fling her against the wall.

Forcing herself on to her feet shakily, she attempted to escape, but it took no genius to see that she wouldn’t make it out of the way in time.

He had no time to try and figure out how he might use the basic charms, or transfiguration he’d learned with so much effort in order to keep up with his year-mates. He threw himself forward, grabbing her, and floating her up, and out of the way of its next blow.

She felt his arms around her, and saw his face, right before she finally collapsed from the damage of the previous blow, and everything went black.

---

---

## Chapter Seventeen

---

*The troll had Hermione trapped, the stall she'd tried to hide in completely smashed. He arrived just in time to see the thing lift her up with the ease of a child lifting a doll, and fling her against the wall.*

*Forcing herself on to her feet shakily, she attempted to escape, but it took no genius to see that she wouldn't make it out of the way in time.*

*He had no time to try and figure out how he might use the basic charms, or transfiguration he'd learned with so much effort in order to keep up with his year-mates. He threw himself forward, grabbing her, and floating her up, and out of the way of its next blow.*

*She felt his arms around her, and saw his face, right before she finally collapsed from the damage of the previous blow, and everything went black.*

---

It was at that moment that the twins arrived, and with their arrival the situation shifted so abruptly that it was almost laughable. A muttered incantation later, and the troll's attention was no longer focused on any of those present, but rather on trying, without success to get at the flying bits of debris that now followed it around, banging repeatedly against the back of its head.

"We were working on developing the spell this morning to enchant snowballs with," explained Fred upon Harry's inquiry.

"Though we expected our first test subject to be Quirrel's turban. Never imagined it's be a troll," added George.

It seemed a rather strange scene to the teachers who arrived moments after the twins- a troll spinning around in circles with debris repeatedly hitting the back of its head, the limp and battered body of

an eleven-year-old girl lying on the floor, and the two redheaded twins animatedly discussing pranks with a ghost.

"Hello, Professors," Fred addressed them solemnly.

"What, for goodness sake, is going on here?" demanded his irate Head-of-House.

"Harry sent Peeves to inform us that one of the younger students was in trouble. We decided that we didn't have enough time to search for back up, he replied, shrugging. "Given the amount of damage already done by the time we arrived, I'd say we were right in thinking we didn't have much time."

Harry, didn't bother waiting around, and floated off to inform Madame Pomphrey of the incident. The teachers, after their brief inquiry (and a brief debate between professors Snape and McGonagall on whether to give or take points) had finished dealing with the troll, and then dismissed the twins without telling them anything about what was to be done.

---

On the following morning the Granger girl was, at for the moment, still alive, and had been sent up to the hospital wing for medical examinations and treatment. Meanwhile, in the corner of the Gryffindor common room a whispered conversation was taking place.

"What are you going to do? If she talks-"

"She won't."

"You've got a plan?"

"Of course."

"Good old Harry, of course he has a plan, how could you ever think otherwise, Fred? Oh, my heart-"

"Enough with dramatics, George. I'll survive, really. See you two later."



“What? Wherever are you going?”

“To the hospital wing, naturally. It’ll be best if I’m there when she wakes.”

“Wait- Harry- aren’t you going to tell us your plan?”

Harry smirked as he pushed open the portrait hole. “Of course not.”

---

The hospital wing was empty, save for Madame Pomphrey and the still unconscious Hermione Granger.

“Madame Pomphrey? I was wondering how Hermione’s doing.”

The hospital matron looked rather surprised. Apparently it wasn’t a common occurrence to have ghosts visiting the hospital wing. She recovered her composure, and surprisingly chose to answer. Whether it was because she wanted to talk to someone about the state the young girl was in, or because she’d heard about Harry’s role in her rescue, he wasn’t sure.

“She’s in critical condition, but I think she’ll pull through. She received several broken ribs, and a punctured lung, but what I’m most concerned about is the damage to the back of her skull.”

“How bad is it?”

“It’ll take time to mend. There are spells and potions that help, of course, but only a certain amount can be done at once without causing additional problems. The tissues are delicate, and will take time to heal and strengthen. The brain tissues especially are a delicate issue. It could cause memory loss, blindness, confusion, loss of coordination . . . all sorts of side effects to be present for until they mend properly, because of the focus of her magic in that area.”

Harry nodded. “Have you applied any treatments yet?”

"Some cleaning and healing spells. Would you mind watching over her while I go pick up some potions Professor Snape is brewing specifically? I'd like to get them to her as soon as possible."

"Sure, no problem." He drifted over to the bed containing Hermione.

"I'll be back in a little while." With that Madame Pomphrey headed hurriedly out of the hospital wing. As much as she tried not to show it, she was obviously deeply anxious.

---

For several minutes after the hospital matron left, Harry watched Hermione's unconscious form. *Wake up.* He thought of somehow pushing energy into her, making her to wake so he could settle this . . .

Her eyes flickered open, though he was unsure whether or not she could see him.

"Hermione," he coaxed softly, "it's Harry. You're in the hospital wing, safe. Everything is going to be all right."

"Harry?" she tried to push herself into a sitting position, but collapsed back down onto the bed. "You never were a ghost at all."

"No, not particularly," he replied nonchalantly. She started to laugh, but the laugh soon turned into a cough which racked her small body. Harry waited for the coughs to cease before he spoke again.

"Although, I may soon be a ghost in fact as well as belief if it is discovered that I'm alive. I have reason to believe that there is trouble brewing- but that is nothing you need to worry about. You just need to rest, and get well. Ah, and here is the healer now. I'd best leave you to your rest."

---

Floating through the halls after leaving the hospital wing, Harry knew two things for certain; he knew he'd successfully made sure Hermione would say nothing, and he knew, because it was plain to

see, that there was a certain aristocratic Slytherin headed down the hallway whom he would assuredly have to address.

“Potter,” sneered the blond. “So, even as a ghost you’ve managed to create a stir.”

“Is that so?” asked Harry coolly, raising an eyebrow at the Malfoy heir.

“Saving the poor likkle mudblood,” he continued, as if he hadn’t heard Harry, “sending for help so she wouldn’t get squashed by the big bad troll. What a pathetic fool.”

“Really, Malfoy. Ponder this; if it is wise to ‘*know thine enemy*,’ is it not also wise not to let ‘thine enemy’ know you?” He smirked at the surprised blond. “I see nothing of disadvantage to me about gaining the trust of others while keeping my own purposes concealed.”

Malfoy looked at him for a moment. “You know Potter, you’re not quite as thick as I thought. Almost intelligent, even, for a *ghost* at any rate.’

“I’m flattered,” Harry answered, his voice thick with sarcasm. Then, nodding to the boy, he began once more on his way. “I’ll see you around Malfoy,” he concluded, glancing over his shoulder, before disappearing around the corner. He couldn’t help but be amused as he made his way up to Gryffindor tower to meet with the twins that the Malfoy boy showed no signs of having picked up on the fact that Harry’s description of practical ways of dealing with others might refer to him just as much as anyone else.

---

---

## Chapter Eighteen

---

*"Really, Malfoy. Ponder this; if it is wise to 'know thine enemy ,' is it not also wise not to let 'thine enemy' know you?" He smirked at the surprised blond. "I see nothing of disadvantage to me about gaining the trust of others while keeping my own purposes concealed."*

*Malfoy looked at him for a moment. "You know Potter, you're not quite as thick as I thought. Almost intelligent, even, for a ghost at any rate."*

*"I'm flattered," Harry answered, his voice thick with sarcasm. Then, nodding to the boy, he began once more on his way. "I'll see you around Malfoy," he concluded, glancing over his shoulder, before disappearing around the corner. He couldn't help but be amused as he made his way up to Gryffindor tower to meet with the twins that the Malfoy boy showed no signs of having picked up on the fact that Harry's description of practical ways of dealing with others might refer to him just as much as anyone else."*

---

Despite having woken up for long enough to have a brief conversation with Harry, Hermione still spent most of her time asleep, or unconscious- he wasn't sure which of the two terms was most accurate. Madame Pomphrey wasn't letting in visitors, and though Harry was almost certain he would be allowed in, as the staff had limited, if any control over the ghosts, he was spending this particular evening on quite different pursuits. As entertaining as Hogwarts could be, he had come here for a purpose- to keep an eye on Quirrel. On this particular day, he was leafing through a book on magical artifacts, in the hope of finding a mention of some sort of stone. So far, unfortunately, he hadn't had much luck. The first chapter, which he had actually read, rather than flipping through as he was doing now, had given over-views of various magical objects- pensive, rememberalls, sneekoscopes, and other fairly common items. The closest thing he'd found had been a reference to a wizarding game

called 'gobstones.' He rather doubted that was what he was looking for, however, perhaps because it would be utterly preposterous for anyone, especially a pair of murderous fiends, to go to such trouble to steal a common game that could probably be bought easily at Diagon Alley. Beginning to flip through the next chapter, Harry paused at a glimpse of an odd black and white sketch that seemed to show an antique mirror, with someone kneeling before it, gazing into it with the oddest facial expression, a sort of mix of longing, sorrow, hope, despair, spirituality, and greed. Despite its irrelevance to any sort of 'stone,' he stopped to read the brief explanation.

***"ERISED STRA EHRU OYT UBE CAFRU OYTON WOHSI***

***I SHOW NOT YOUR FACE, BUT YOUR HEART'S DESIRE***

*The Mirror of Erised is undoubtably one of the intriguing, unique, and deadly artifacts known to the wizarding world. Named for the first word of the inscription engraved into its frame, the mirror's purpose is also made clear.*

*Though seemingly harmless, many have been unable to pull away, and, entranced by what they see in its surface, have wasted away before it, forgetting all else."*

Harry wondered, for a moment, what he would see, where he to look into it. Truly, he had no idea. And yet. . . he wasn't sure he wanted to know. Perhaps because he feared how far he might go to gain his heart's deepest desire, after glimpsing it. Maybe because he feared to know he could never gain what he saw there, or to gain it and be disappointed. Or perhaps because the last thing he wanted was anyone, or anything, telling him what he desired. Somehow, despite the confusion, the search meant something, and wandering and getting to know the world meant something. He had no desire to let some mirror take that away.

He'd become rather spoiled, he thought suddenly, to have already become so accostomed to the comforts here that he'd feel a need for anything unnecessary for survival.

Harry replaced the book on the shelf after flipping through a few more pages. He wasn't seeing anything helpful here, so perhaps it was

time to try a different approach. He'd try that tomorrow. For now. . . he had something else to look into.

---

"Greetings, Baron. It's a pleasure to see you again."

"Young Potter." He nodded briefly to Harry. "Quirrel headed for the third floor as soon as everyone left, as you guessed he would." He paused for a moment, as if waiting for something.

"Game's up, Potter. Tell me whatever it is you know, or think you know."

"Finish telling me whatever information you gathered first."

"An why pray tell, would I do that?"

"I highly doubt it's anywhere near as important as the information I posses. You'll suffer more than I will if you refuse to comply."

"Unless I demand my favor."

"Which you would hardly waste on information you could get anyway."

"I'll make a Slytherin of you yet, Potter," remarked the Baron in a tone that sounded almost fond. "Very well."

"Snape headed him off, and got his leg bitten by the dog."

"So Snape knows, or suspects, something." Harry nodded thoughtfully, "And Quirrel knows that Snape doesn't trust him. He'll be even more careful in the future, so we'll have to keep a close eye on him."

"Potter," snapped the Baron impatiently, "details. NOW."

"Patience, patience." Harry chided, smirking. "I overheard a sort of conversation in Riddle Manor during the summer, between Quirrel and voice, presumably Voldemort. They were discussing how to steal a stone, among other things."

“Riddle Manor?” the Baron gave him a searching look. “Definitely Voldemort, but what in Salazar’s name were you doing at Riddle Manor?”

“That, your Bloodiness, is irrelevant to the issue of my suspicions. Therefore I’m under no obligation to answer.”

“You came to Hogwarts because of what you heard.”

“Of course. They mentioned me briefly, after all.

“Somehow, knowing you, I’m not surprised.”

---

It wasn’t until late the next day that Harry finally cornered the Malfoy boy in order to try out his new idea for getting information.

“Malfoy?”

“What now, Potter?” the blond sneered.

“What do you know about Dumbledore?”

“That he’s a muggle-loving old fool. Why?”

“Just snooping. Any chance you’d know of any sources I could investigate?”

“Not in particular. There’s probably something in the library.”

“And of course that will help me.”

“Couldn’t you get one of your Gryffindor pets to look it up?”

“Granger’s in the hospital wing, remember? And I figured that, being from a proper pureblood family, you’d be more knowledgeable, but I guess I was wrong. . .”

“Fine, Potter. I’ll owl father and ask, if only to get you to stop bugging me. But honestly, I don’t see why you bother. You’re dead incase you hadn’t notice.”

“You, honest? In your dreams, Malfoy. And, incase you hadn’t noticed, I still have some influence in the world. The assistance is appreciated, however. See you around, Malfoy.”

The blond watched the ghost-boy float off. He couldn’t help thinking the “boy-who-lived-only-to-die-in-a-house-fire” was a rather remarkable person, that even as a ghost he had more character and presence than many of the living.

---



## Chapter Nineteen

---

*“Couldn’t you get one of your Gryffindor pets to look it up?”*

*“Granger’s in the hospital wing, remember? And I figured that, being from a proper pureblood family, you’d be more knowledgeable, but I guess I was wrong. . .”*

*“Fine, Potter. I’ll owl father and ask, if only to get you to stop bugging me. But honestly, I don’t see why you bother. You’re dead incase you hadn’t notice.”*

*“You, honest? In your dreams, Malfoy. And, incase you hadn’t noticed, I still have some influence in the world. The assistance is appreciated, however. See you around, Malfoy.”*

*The blond watched the ghost-boy float off. He couldn’t help thinking the “boy-who-lived-only-to-die-in-a-house-fire was a rather remarkable person, that even as a ghost he had more character and presence than many of the living.*

---

*“Wicked! You got it!”*

Harry raised an eyebrow at George.

*“About time,” Fred remarked jokingly, “You’re *only* a week ahead in every class.”*

*“Uh huh. At least I’m no longer blowing things up or setting thing on fire.”*

*“You say that like it’s a good thing. . .”*

Harry rolled his eyes as the twins laughed.

When Harry next sought out the Malfoy heir in order to see what information he'd gotten from his father, he found the blond smirking rather nastily.

"Father says we've no need to tell you anything, or associate with ghosts at all, for that matter. Maybe you could beg a glimpse at a chocolate frog card of one of your Gryffindor pets. It's the achievement Dumbledore's most proud of, and the only source *they'd* be able to afford."

"Do you have a copy of one?"

"You actually are desperate enough to hope to find interesting dirt on the old fool on his *chocolate frog card*?"

"Sure. Now go fetch a copy for me to look at. You'll at least get the amusement of watching my efforts fail utterly."

"As you say, Potter." The blond sneered, bowing mockingly before fetching the card.

Harry briefly skimmed the short article present on the card.

*"Dumbledore is most famous*

*for his defeat of the dark*

*wizard Grindelwald in 1945,*

*for the discovery of the*

*twelve uses of dragon's blood,*

*and his work on alchemy with*

*his partner, Nicholas Flamel."*

"Malfoy, do you know what 'alchemy' means?"

"It's an almost impossible branch of magic."

"And?"

“It’s the process meant to make a philosopher’s stone. If it succeeds, it supposedly can provide immortality through with a substance called the elixir of life, and turn metals to gold. It is almost impossible to succeed however, as I told you. Really Potter, don’t you know anything? Then again, I suppose you wouldn’t, being both dead, and raised by *muggles*.”

“Go to hell, Malfoy.”

“What in Salazar’s name is that supposed to mean?”

“That’s for me to know, and you to find out.” Then, with his usual infuriating “see you around, Malfoy,” the ghost-boy floated off.

---

“Harry!” the twins, it seemed, from the way they called out his name, waving frantically, had been looking for him.

“The professors asked us to fetch you. Apparently the girl woke up, and has been asking for you.”

“What? Well, I guess it’s about time she woke up. . . I’d best head up to the hospital wing.”

Then twins watched as he hurriedly floated off.

“I dunno, George, he seemed a bit anxious. . . .”

George shrugged. “Mayhaps our poor likkle ghostie is afraid the teachers suspect something.”

Fred stared at him for a moment, then blinked. “Or maybe she knows.”

---

To Harry’s surprise, he found Albus Dumbledore waiting for him in the hall leading to the hospital wing. His expression was neither grim, nor cheerful, but Harry thought he could see a strange, ever-present twinkle in his bright blue eyes. It was really the eyes that made the difference; his face was old and wrinkled, his hair and beard gone to gray so long they were almost entirely white, but you’d almost never

notice how truly *old* he was, because of the bright eyes and firm gaze that projected from beneath his brows.

“Ah, there you are Harry.” He reached into his pocket and brought out a lemon-drop, which he unwrapped slowly, and popped into his mouth. He pulled another out of his pocket, but after looking back over at Harry put it back, as if he’d been going to offer a lemon drop to Harry, but then thought better of it.

“Miss Granger has been asking for you, as I presume you’ve heard. She’s suffered some temporary memory loss, and being one of the last people she saw you’re one of the clearer things in her memory.”

Harry shrugged noncommittally. “Makes sense.”

“It does, doesn’t it. She’s very lucky you were there, Mr. Potter. She’d most likely have died otherwise.”

“Fred and George deserve most of the credit. I just fetched help.”

“Of course. None the less, no one would have managed anything in time without your warning. Ah. . . here we are.”

They enter the hospital wing, which was as always brightly lit and extremely *white*. Hermione was sitting up in the bed watching their approach.

“Harry?”

“Present. You feeling alright?”

“I guess. My memory’s a bit foggy. . .”

He nodded. “So I heard. It should improve as you get better.”

“I certainly hope so . . . it’s driving me crazy!”

“One would think so. Unfortunately life has a habit of twisting and turning in odd directions.”

Hermione gave a slight smile. “It seems so. And this hospital wing is going to be the doom of me. It certainly isn’t helping, at any rate.”

Madame Pomphrey, having just entered the hospital wing took this opportunity to interrupt.

“It is necessary, however for you to have treatments to help your recovery. I don’t think it’s necessary for you to stay here for the entire time you wait for you memory to be completely intact, on the condition that your ghost friend is willing to keep an eye out for you, and that you check in everyday for a checkup and treatment.”

“Of course! Thank you Madame Pomphrey! May I leave now? “

The hospital Matron raised an eyebrow. “Now, Miss Granger? Well, I suppose. . .”

“Come on Harry!”

She was on her feet and dashing for the door seconds later, before the healer could change her mind. Harry followed, floating behind her. He couldn’t help but think this was probably the least serious he’d seen her. He wondered why it was that such small thing could make such a difference when life gets complicated. Perhaps, as thoughts of his own past led him to believe, it was because when life gets crazy, you need to grasp onto whatever bits of happiness you can.

---

Hermione collapsed on the lawn after having run the whole way there. She gazed around her for a moment, uncertain, before turning to address the ‘ghost’ that had followed her there.

“Now what?”

He studied her for a moment. “Fly.”

“What? But that’s. . .”

“There’s no one here to see. It might clear your thoughts a little. That’s what you wanted, after all, wasn’t it? When you were in the hospital wing, you wanted to get out, to be free.”

“Yes. . .”

“Then try it. You can never get anywhere if you never try.”

“Alright. . . .”

Hermione fetched one of the school brooms from the broom closet, then returned to the lawn. She hesitated a moment, glancing at Harry, before mounting the broom and kicking off the ground.

---

“You okay, Hermione?” asked Neville as they entered the common room.

“I guess. . . . My memory’s been acting up, but Madame Pomphrey says it won’t be permanent.”

She lingered in the door way, glancing around the crowded common room nervously.

The round-faced boy nodded sympathetically. “It must be awful. It’s bad enough being forgetful, but to not be able to remember major things. . . .”

She gave a slight nod. “I can’t say it doesn’t scare me.”

There was silence for a moment. Neville didn’t seem sure quite what to say, but there was a look behind his eyes that seemed almost haunted. It’d always been obvious he was rather sensitive. . .

“You can come over and study with me, if you’d like. There’s probably a lot for you to catch up with, and relearn. I’m not much good at most subjects, but at least I can give you a bit of company.”

“I’ll help.” Harry added abruptly. “Hey Dean, want to join us?”

Dean looked up from where he’d been talking to Seamus Finnegan.

“Sure, Harry. I’ll be right over.”

“Urgh. I’m sick of studying,” Seamus grumbled, “I’ll be on the Quidditch pitch,” he added to Dean.”

“I’ll go with you,” suggested the twins’ younger brother, Ron, following him out the portrait hole.

---

The following day found Harry attending all the first year Gryffindor classes, much to Fred and George’s chagrin. Harry assured them, however, that there would be plenty of time for them to drag him around to shock people after classes.

"It's probably best for you to attend the first year classes anyway," Fred admitted, "you'll learn more."

"Which'll make our job easier." added George, winking.

Harry rolled his eyes. "Well, as you obviously have my best interests at heart. . . ."

"Of course."

"Undoubtably."

"Right. See you after classes."

He floated towards the portrait hole, following several students who were leaving the tower. His departure was almost soon enough to miss Fred's last remark on the subject, but not quite. In a fake sob, the redhead announced, "Our ickle Harry-kins is all grown up and going to classes without us."

He wasn't sure whether he was more inclined to laugh or to hex the pair of them.

---

Harry and Hermione were the first to arrive for Charms, followed shortly after by Neville, who sat down next to them. Dean, seeing Harry, made his way over to sit by them.

"We still need to organize that soccer tournament."

It was the sort of half joking statement that broke the ice a little, and Harry nodded in agreement.

Seamus and Ron, when they arrived, sat on the fringes of the group, Seamus on the other side of Dean. Class went rather smoothly until Seamus managed to light the feather he was supposed to be levitating on fire.

"Finnegan!" Professor Flitwick squeaked. It obviously wasn't the first time he'd had to deal with this sort of incident.



“Aw, come on,” Harry interrupted, “what’s the point of something that doesn’t explode or catch on fire?”

The Irish boy threw Harry a grateful look.

---

It was on the second day of Harry attending all classes with the first years that they ran into trouble. They had double-potions with the Slytherins that day, and Harry, Hermione, and Neville and started heading towards the potions dungeon slightly early to ensure that they wouldn’t be late when they had the misfortune of running into Draco Malfoy, as well as his two tag-alongs, Crabbe and Goyle.

“Longbottom,” sneered the blond, “it seems you’ve sunk even lower, if possible. It was pathetic enough that you’d only managed to make a friend of a mere *ghost*, but a pureblood like you associating with a filthy little mudblood? Of course, we’ve always known that if brains were galleons you’d be poorer than the Weasleys, but still, it’s shocking how pathetic-“

Unfortunately, he was unable to finish his sentence, as he was interrupted by Hermione’s fist connecting with his jaw.

Crabbe attempted to move towards the blond where he now lay sprawled on the floor, but found Neville standing in his way.

“Call off the body-guards, Malfoy.” The ghost-boy spoke in a cool, calm tone that immediately captured his attention. “I don’t particularly appreciate you baiting my *friends*. You’d do well to remember that although I can’t hex you, I can still talk.”

“And you really think they’re going to get away with this,” Malfoy snarled, blood streaming from his broken nose.

“Oh, I think they will. Are you going to tell Snape the eleven-year-old mudblood beat you up? Or would you prefer to tell you father.”

“And what would you do if I don’t call off my ‘body guards,’ Ghost-Boy?”

"I could make sure your father hears of this," Harry answered, shrugging, "not to mention have Seamus hex you. Hey, Seamus!"

The Irish boy, who had just entered the corridor, had no qualms about threatening Malfoy at wand-point.

"You couldn't successfully cast a spell if your life depended on it, Finnegan. Most of the time you just explode whatever you're trying to enchant," Malfoy sneered.

"All the worse for you, Malfoy, all the worse for you." Harry retorted, smiling.

Malfoy paled.

"Crabbe, Goyle, quit messing around with this riff-raff, or we'll be late to class."

Hermione and Neville, who'd been hard pressed with the two of them closing in, were clearly relieved. They headed down the corridor towards the potions classroom. Harry hung back for a moment, watching Malfoy climb to his feet.

"You don't want me as your enemy, Malfoy. Pull many more stunts like that, and you'll have no choice," he whispered in the aristocrat's ear, carefully making sure he was just close enough for the cold-spell he'd set to send a shiver down the blonde's spine.

"You'd have been one hell of a person to deal with if you'd managed to survive this long," muttered Malfoy, but the ghost-boy had already started floating after the others, and was soon out of sight.

---

For the next few months, life fell into a steady pattern. Classes continued. Dean took to hanging out with Hermione, Neville, and Harry during classes and while studying, with Seamus often hanging out nearby. Malfoy didn't bother them again. Hermione still had memory issues, which slowed her down a little, and made her a bit nervous in regard to classes, but overall life continued without incident.

It was not classes, or the first years, Fred and George, or even the careful maintenance of his ghost-cover that earned first place among Harry's concerns, however. He had to keep an eye on Quirrel. The not-so-talented Defense Professor's mannerisms had remained consistent for the most part so far, as had the intensity with which he was watched by Snape. As far as Harry's calculations went, that meant it wasn't time. Not yet.

The Christmas holidays were approaching fast, much to the delight of almost all of Hogwarts's occupants, whether they were going home or staying at the school over break. The decorations were already being assembled, including twelve large Christmas trees that were brought in and decorated. Set up beneath the sparkling sky of the Great Hall, it was a sight such as none Harry had ever seen.

The Weasleys would be staying, since their parents were on vacation, and Hermione would be staying, because of her memory issues. Harry looked forward to the holidays in an idle, curious way that was mixed in with a fair bit of apprehension. The constant feeling of trouble on the way was hanging over his head, and he wasn't sure when it would arrive.

---

## ***Chapter 21: Rumors of the Dark***

---

“What on earth am I supposed to write to them?” exclaimed a frustrated Hermione as she crumpled up her most recent failed attempt at a letter and threw it into a nearby trash bin.

She took on a sarcastic tone as she continued, “Hi Mum and Dad, I can hardly remember you at all at the moment, and so don’t particularly miss you. My memory may be improving, since I’ve been having an easier time remembering things from earlier this year, but it isn’t good enough to remember you. Happy Christmas.”

“I dunno, that might do the trick,” commented Ron Weasley from a nearby chair. A book connected with his head a moment later.

“And finish your homework, Ronald. That essay’s due first thing tomorrow, incase you’d forgotten. And quit grumbling about it. Vacation starts the day after that, as you know perfectly well, and you’ll have plenty of time to laze about then.”

Ron gave an annoyed look at her back after she’d turned away.

“Keep it brief, simple, and honest. Just omit a few details here and there,” suggested Harry lazily from his position by the fire.

“Thanks Harry. I’ll try,” she sighed, taking out yet another piece of parchment.

---

Hermione did finally get a letter written and sent to her parents in time for Christmas, though Harry wasn’t sure whether Ronald had ever finished his essay. Harry followed them up to the Hogsmeade station, invisible, as they went to say goodbye to the other first years, who were heading home for Christmas.

The platform was a bustle of noise, mostly cheerful.

“Goodbye Neville, Dean, merry Christmas!” Hermione yelled above the clatter.

Then everyone who was leaving had boarded, and the train began to move. A long note blew from the train’s whistle as it flew down the tracks, and out of sight, leaving those who’d come to say goodbye to their friends to trudge back up to the castle amidst the first light falling flakes of snow.

---

Christmas dinner turned out to be a much more bittersweet affair than Harry had expected. The Great Hall was decorated gloriously for the holidays, complete with twelve huge Christmas trees. The students were merrily helping themselves to the feast, chattering laughing, and pulling party crackers.

And Harry watched. He couldn’t help but feel a longing to be part of it all.

Despite that the blocked out tunnel in which he currently made residence was spelled to be warm, and furnished more comfortably than anywhere he could remember staying, and he could finally get plenty of food without any worries, he found himself almost wishing he’d never left his place in Little Hamilton. He’d never really been truthful to the people there, and so they’d never really known him, or he them, but there had been the comfort of a basic familiarity, and of being part of something.

He had just started to float off after the feast was over when he heard George shout his name.

“Come on Harry, we can’t have our favorite ghost wandering off on Christmas!”

Harry turned and followed them up towards Gryffindor tower, listening absentmindedly as they chattered about their latest prank idea. Apparently they were thinking of making enchanted sweets, and were trying to brainstorm possible effects.

“So,” called out their younger brother, Ronald, as they reached Gryffindor tower, “Anyone up for a game of chess?”

“*Some* of us,” replied Percy contemptuously, “have more *important* things to do.”

“Do you want to play, Harry?” asked Fred, who had been watching Harry closely.

“*What?*” asked Ron. “But he’s-“

“If you set it up, there’ll be no problem. He can talk, obviously, so he can tell the pieces where to move, same as anyone else,” George interrupted.

“Do you want to play, then?” Ron asked, turning to Harry.

“I don’t really know how . . . . “

Ron replied rapidly, gaining enthusiasm.

“Come on, I’ll show you. There are two rooks, two knights, two bishops, a king, a queen, and eight pawns on each side. The knights move two over and one up in any direction, the bishops can only move diagonally. . .”

---

Between playing chess with Ronald, who now regarded him in a rather careless, friendly manner, studying with Hermione, practicing spells with the twins, and just hanging out with the mentioned latter three, Harry had a good deal of entertainment for the holidays, which he generally enjoyed. Quirrel still hadn’t made his move, and probably wouldn’t for a while, but nevertheless Harry had taken to checking his location on the Marauder’s Map daily, usually sometime after classes had ended, to make sure he hadn’t ventured toward the forbidden corridor.

It was on an evening not long after break ended that the map showed him that Quirrel had ventured into suspicious territory; the forbidden forest. Perhaps he was supposed to be there, but Harry doubted it.

He continued to attend classes with the first years and to divide his free time up as usual despite this, but made sure to observe Quirrel closely when Hogwarts's known living residents ate their meals, and during the first years' DADA class.

A bit under a week later, the breakfast table was filled with excited chattering. Two of the older students had, apparently, come across a vampire eating a unicorn during their detention in the Forbidden Forest. The only description they gave of the "vampire" was that it was hooded and cloaked in black. Harry might have disregarded the story except for one thing: according to the rumors, when asked how they survived, they said it was because they ran. Harry doubted anyone making up a story would give that sort of answer. He was going to have to research unicorns, and keep a closer eye on Quirrel.

---

Harry snuck into the library, invisible, just before closing that evening. After several minutes of scanning the shelves, he pulled out the library's copy of *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*.

After a moment of flipping through its pages, he found what he was looking for.

Unicorn Blood would keep a person alive, even on the brink of death. It would bind them to a cursed life, a half-life. So Quirrel, and therefore Voldemort, was that desperate, and that weak. It meant, nonetheless, that they were preparing to make their move.

He shut the book, replaced it on the shelf, and left the library to retire for the night.

---

Harry floated down a corridor after Quirrel, once again grateful for the silence it provided. He barely managed to follow Quirrel (*Voldemort*) into an empty classroom before he (*they*) shut the door.

Harry was, of course, invisible at the moment. The eavesdropper. The spy.

Voldemort was speaking. "We'll have to get Dumbledore out of the castle. A fake ministry letter should do, if we wait a while until this *vampire story* blows over. Another such mistake, Quirrel, and you won't live to see another day."

"Yes, master, of course . . . I won't fail you again . . ."

"See that you do not."

With that, Quirrel (*Voldemort*) swept out of the room.

Harry waited until they were a ways away before leaving the room himself. So there was time, though perhaps not all that much.

---

Harry was in potions with the first years, as usual. Snape had generally been leaving them alone for a while now. Though he'd obviously been uncomfortable with Harry's presence in his class at first, Harry's daily "Hello"s and "have a nice day, Professor" s had calmed any animosity that might have built over it. Not that being ignored was being favored, but for the Gryffindors he sat with (Hermione and Neville), it was an improvement. Snape had also been watching Quirrel closely of late. Harry studied the professor closely for a moment, then came to a decision.

"I'll catch up with you for the next class, 'Mione, I want to stay after and talk to the Professor briefly."

"About what? There isn't much point in a ghost asking questions about class. . . ."

She meant that asking questions about class could cause suspicions, or give him away, and Harry interpreted her somewhat vague statement correctly. It wasn't class he wanted to bring up however, but he wasn't about to correct her on that assumption.

"I'll be careful, Hermione. See you later."

She nodded reluctantly, and left with the others.



Harry floated toward the front of the classroom and waited as the last few students filed out before speaking.

"You know what he's up to."

Snape looked up, obviously startled.

"What are you talking about, Potter?"

"Quirrel. It's almost time, and you know it. I'd give it two weeks at most before--"

"Quit the senseless blathering, Potter."

"You know perfectly well what I'm talking about. You watch him the same way I do."

"Why would I discuss any information with you? Your mouth obviously still has influence, as we all can tell from the troll incident. I don't know what you're playing at Potter, but--"

"Watching, for the most part. Giving a bit of help to those I think deserve it. And messing with Quirrel. He's a fool, and I have nothing better to do than foil his plans at the moment, unless you have any other ideas."

"Cut to the chase, Potter. What exactly do you know?"

"Quirrel is trying to steal the philosopher's stone that is hidden somewhere beneath a trapdoor in the forbidden corridor that is guarded by a three-headed dog. He let in the troll on Halloween as a diversion, but you headed him off and got bitten. He'll try again sometime in the near future. He has been getting progressively more nervous, which makes it rather obvious. But you knew all that."

Harry had, in fact, left out some of what he knew, since he had no logical way of explaining how he knew of Lord Voldemort's involvement, and no qualms about withholding information.

"Obviously, Potter. I'm not a complete dunderhead, unlike most of the castle's inhabitants."

Harry rolled his eyes. "So, what are you planning on doing?"

"Curiosity killed the cat."

"And satisfaction brought it back. Despite that I highly doubt having my curiosity satisfied is going to magically bring me back to life, I rather think it'd help me more fully enjoy the show."

Meeting Harry's eyes again, Snape began to speak once more. It was overwhelmingly apparent to Harry that it was easier for Snape to do so because of his perception of what Harry was. A shadow, a memory, a symbol, a phantom, something harmless that couldn't really reach him, a way of organizing his own thoughts, it didn't fully occur to him that Harry was, in fact, a person. He was beginning to react much the way Hermione had at the start of the year.

What Harry didn't entirely realize, however, was that the way people opened up to him was not entirely because they thought him harmless. Having had years of practice at lying smoothly and getting along with strangers he had, like Tom Riddle before him, the persuasion skills to charm the birds from the trees should he try.

"I'll continue to keep a close eye on Quirrel. It wouldn't do to let down Dumbledore's expectations."

"I doubt that's the only reason you're interested in what he's up to."

"Given that I spend my time attempting to teach potions to a bunch of hopeless nitwits, I'd think that hardly surprising. It's hardly something I care to do, and don't have nearly as much control as I'd like. As you put it earlier, I don't have anything better to do, and only a fool would sit by with such an obvious plot going on involving a powerful magical artifact."

"Yes, that makes sense. If you don't mind me asking, why don't you look for a different occupation if you are displeased with this one? I'd think a professor such as yourself would have an easy time finding other work."

Snape was staring at him with an expression containing a mixture of pain, guilt, fear, regret, pride, bitterness, and spite. In a single motion,

he pulled up his left sleeve, revealing a faint sort of tattoo depicting a skull with a snake slithering from the mouth.

“Do you know what that is, Potter?”

Harry contemplated saying that it was a tattoo, but decided Snape probably wouldn't appreciate the observation, and settled for a simple “no.”

“It's the darkmark, the sign of the Dark Lord. It was shone in the sky above each place where his forces struck, and marked on the left forearm of each of his deatheaters.”

There are some simple actions that show a lot about a person. Severus Snape, for example, was the sort of man who might on some level despise a person for measuring him as drastically better or worse than he was; for ignorance.

“And Dumbledore knows, and protects you.”

“Yes. I became a spy towards the end of the war, and so he *trusts* me.”

“Dumbledore is rather unique. You can't say that his logic makes no sense.

“I was a deatheater, and nothing changes that. I killed and tortured for the Dark Lord, and believed in his cause. I studied the Dark Arts, and loved them. You have no idea how fascinating the Dark Arts are to study, to fight, and to practice. Many, varied, ever changing, eternal, unfixed, mutating, and indestructible . . . . I'd say it showed some sense on the Headmaster's part that he has refused to give me the Defense position, but the incompetent, untrustworthy louts he hires cause me to think otherwise.”

There was a bitter sneer on his face now, and he continued. “I was never loyal to the old fool, and only briefly to the fork-tongued half-blood. Always the double agent, if not triple.”

He paused, and his hard gaze fixed firmly on the hazy figure before him, waiting.

“Well?” Harry asked, “Aren’t you going to continue?”

Snape glared back at him.

“Perhaps, Potter, I expected you to say something after my last . . . *revelation*.”

Harry shrugged.

“You’re a Slytherin. Did you really expect me to be surprised, Snape?”

When Snape didn’t answer, he continued.

“What are you looking for, reassurance, or judgment? What did you hope to gain by telling me this?”

“Very well, Potter. Give me your esteemed judgment, since you seem so keen to do so.”

The ghost-boy was, at first, unsure of what to say. Too light a judgment would be an obvious lie, and the flattery would only be taken in contempt. To judge too in a harsh, straightforward, detailed manner, however, would be something he had no right to do given that he barely knew the man. He settled on the first answer that came to mind.

“Well,” Harry replied, a slight smirk playing across his lips, “if you ever feel a desire to get into Hufflepuff, I’m afraid you’ll be in for a disappointment.”

The Potions Master snorted slightly, his lips curving subtly.

“Oh, get on with you Potter. I’ve a class in a few minutes, bother me some other time.”

“Bye then, Snape. We’ll chat later.”

Harry floated off toward the wall, then disappeared. He waited, invisible, until the first students for the next class entered the room to

slip out the door, leaving the double agent to ponder the strange boy that had come to haunt the halls of Hogwarts.

---

---

## ***Chapter Twenty-Two***

---

As Harry had suspected, it wasn't long before Quirrel made his move. On checking the map that evening, he found that both Quirrel and Dumbledore were missing from the map. Where ever the trap door lead was not shown on the map, so Quirrel had probably already gone down, and it seemed he had succeeded in tricking Dumbledore into leaving Hogwarts.

Although he'd originally come here for curiosity's sake, he had every intention of hindering Quirrel. Allowing people who wanted to kill you to get a hold of powerful magical objects didn't seem like a particularly intelligent idea.

Harry headed straight toward the third floor. There was always the possibility Snape would realize that Quirrel was making his move and stop him, but Harry doubted it, and was hardly about to fetch the man himself. Voldemort was involved, after all, and while he had no personal dislike for the man, the double agent was hardly an ideal person to have along in such situations.

Entering the forbidden corridor, he made a dash for the trapdoor. He was invisible, so the dog couldn't see him. His feet treading on air sounded no footsteps. Unfortunately, breathing makes noise, and dogs have a keen sense of smell. As he jumped forward for the trapdoor, which had already been opened, as he'd suspected, one of the three slobbering heads lunged at him, beginning to close its jaws over him. It wasn't quick enough to hold him, but as he fell through the trap door, the bloody gashes in his side from where its teeth scraped in attempt to grab him hurt terribly. He almost didn't manage to resume his floating in order to slow the fall.

Looking down as he now floated about a foot above the floor, however, he wondered for a moment if it had even been necessary. The ground was covered in some sort of plant-thing, which would assuredly soften the fall. He wondered why-

Devil's Snare. He'd studied it with Hermione. It was a good thing he was floating. Despite that the pain in his side made it harder to

concentrate, he decided to remain floating and invisible for the time being. It was probably best to remain undetected, not to mention avoid any further traps that might be lurking on the floors.

Stupid dog. There had to have been an easier way. After all, there had been no blood on the floor when he'd arrived. It wasn't as if he'd had much time to ponder, however, and Snape obviously hadn't known either.

That Harry made it through at all is rather remarkable, and due mainly to one simple unexpected advantage. He'd been able to make himself "invisible" for years. What he'd truly been focusing on the first time was not to be found, the result of which was to be invisible, but also to be blocked from magical detection. It was, of course, the only reason he hadn't been tracked down years before. Not that a powerful wizard couldn't sense that he was alive, especially if alone with him and paying attention, since all living things have an amount of basic life energy, but it was enough to fool the chess set, which didn't react to his presence, and the doorways where fire should have appeared.

It took a while for Harry to get the winged key, having never flown on a broom before, as well as being injured. It was a lucky turn that he was able to sneak by the rest, he thought as passing the chess set. Despite his games with Ron, he doubted he was good enough to beat the giant set, and even if he was, he wouldn't have been able to concentrate well with the pain in his side. He never knew that flames were supposed to spring up in the doorway ahead after he passed through. He just floated through the room ahead, then took a moment to observe the scene before him.

---

"I see it, myself giving the stone to my master, brewing the elixir of life... but how do I get it? Should I break it?"

Quirrel's ponderings were interrupted by a voice seemingly out of nowhere, a voice that Harry belonged to the one Quirrel referred to as 'Master': Lord Voldemort.

"There's someone there."

Harry shifted to transparency, smirking at the startled, incompetent professor.

It was the Dark Lord who addressed him.

"You're no ghost."

Harry snorted.

"I should think not."

"Don't be too smug. It's only the fact that you were around crowds of people whenever powerful wizards were around that saved you from discovery."

Harry raised an eyebrow.

"Partially, perhaps. I'd attribute it to your overconfidence as well; you're far more alert tonight than you have been all year. I've spied on you on several occasions."

Voldemort blatantly ignored this statement, though his patience was obviously wearing thin.

"Join me, Potter-"

"Why the hell would I do that?"

"Don't be a fool. There is only power, and those too weak to seek it."

"I beg to differ."

"Idiotic child. So *naive*."

"Let's put it this way, Voldie. Power is a *tool*. It's used to get what you want. It's damn moronic to use tools to get more tools. What are you, a tool collector? What's the point of power if you can't even use it properly-"

"Stop blabbering, and come look into this mirror."

Harry shrugged.



"Sure."

He walked forward, thinking quickly.

He had no desire to look into the mirror whatsoever. Perhaps it was ridiculous, but he'd lived by his own rules, and by no means would he let anyone or anything try and tell him what to do with his life, or what he wanted. That was his to decide and discover for himself.

What had Quirrel said earlier? *'Should I break it?'*

He ran the last few steps, eyes closed and sent a hard blow to the center of the mirror.

Cracks spread through the mirror like singed black vines, and Harry was thrown forward as a force from the mirror bowled him over, and a tumult of shattered glass fell to the floor, and the world faded into darkness.

---

When Harry woke, it was to the sound of voices. He kept his eyes shut, lay still, and listened.

"...who knows how long it might be until he recover. I've healed the physical injuries he sustained, but that type of magical exhaustion . . . he's already been asleep for three days!"

"He did quite a nice job stopping Quirrel though."

"Albus!"

"Well, it's true. Not all children his age could have accomplished what he did."

"Or hid under everyone's noses for a year!"

"Which is why he'll be *fine* Poppy."

She sighed. "I'm sure your right, Albus, it's just that this is the worst case we've had up here in years."

“Even worse than the Quidditch injuries you’re always complaining about?”

“Yes. Those never take longer than a day or two to heal, at *worst*, as you know perfectly well.”

“Ah well . . . with luck he’ll be out of bed soon enough. It’s been nice visiting with you, Poppy. I think I’d best head down to the Great Hall for dinner now. Would you care to come along?”

“No, I need to organize the Potions Severus sent up this morning, and keep an eye on my patients. I’ll have one of the house-elves bring me some dinner. Get on with you, and enjoy yourself.”

“Alright then, see you later Poppy.”

Harry waited until he had heard the door shut behind the Headmaster as he left the hospital wing, and the matron’s footsteps fade as she walked into the back room before opening his eyes. After glancing around to make sure no one else was in the room, he switched to invisibility. Then he floated across the room, opened the door as quietly as possible, and slipped outside.

He almost made it out of the school without being noticed. However, as he neared the front door, he found a ghostly figure in his path. It was the Bloody Baron, who had no trouble whatsoever at finding him when he was invisible.

“Mr. Potter.”

“Your Bloodiness.”

“As you’ve decided to leave, I’m calling in my favor now.”

He paused for a moment, then continued. “Be here September first.”

“What?”

“Attend Hogwarts next term. That is what I require.”

Harry stared at him for a moment, then nodded.

“I’ll be here.”

That said, Harry was soon out the door, running across the grounds on his way back to the one place no one would suspect. Who would think to find Harry Potter at the Riddle house, after all?

Thinking back on those last hurried moments later on, Harry wondered what the results of his return might be. It was with both anticipation and apprehension that Harry awaited the summer’s end. It was, after all, the end of something much larger.

Dudley’s “Harry hunting” had kept him on his feet, and he had never really lived on level with his muggle classmates either. It came down to running and hiding. He was good at running.

The last words his aunt had ever spoken to him were these:

“Run away, as fast as you can, and don’t look back.”

He’d been running before that, and would be for years after. Returning to Hogwarts, as himself, would mean an end to something, for you see, he’d never stopped running.

---

**A/N:** So, I’ve finally managed to get another chapter up. It was rather difficult to decide whether to try and put in more classes, etc., but since I didn’t have things such as quidditch games for fillers, and wanted to just get on with the story...

So, what did people think? My plot made this a rather difficult part to balance, but as always, Harry has different information and advantages in the AU than in cannon because of circumstances.

This is not the end. I plan to continue, though I haven’t decided whether to start the next year as a sequel or just put it in with this. Second year should be... interesting. I’ll try to post again relatively soon. What’s your vote: keep it in one fic, keep it in one but divide it into sections, or start the second year as a sequel?

For anyone who wondered, Quirrel was knocked out as well when the mirror cracked, and Voldemort ditched him. I couldn't have Harry ask since he was pretending to be asleep...

Harry can apparate and become invisible wandlessly currently, so yes, he can do some wandless magic. Hermione does remember that Harry isn't a ghost.

Harry didn't mention the Voldemort at first because he was trying to find out where Snape stood, and not afterwards because Snape was/is a double agent. I'm rather fond of Snape, and am obviously not making him out as really evil, but I'm trying to fit in what we know from cannon as well. Having cannon!Snape and Harry semi get along is a rather interesting challenge to write. There will be more interactions with Snape and other characters when the next term starts. I have a feeling the former will be a bit annoyed...

---

## ***Epilogue***

---

“So you mean to say he hid under our noses for a year, single handedly stopped Quirrel and the Dark Lord from getting the philosophers stone, and ran off with out anyone noticing?”

“We though he’d be asleep for a while yet-” Dumbledore explained patiently.

“That horrid little brat!”

“Severus, you’re being far too harsh on Harry. He made it clear from the start that he hated being used as some sort of symbol. It’s hardly as if he owes it to us to stay here.”

He glowered at her, but didn’t reply. The Gryffindor head of house was not an easy person to argue with, and his true reasons for being irritated weren’t things he wanted the rest of the staff to know.

He hated being bested. He hated that he hadn’t caught Potter at his game. Most of all he hated how he’d let his guard down. Potter knew far too much. The boy’s cunning was admirable. And he hated that too.

“Has anyone figured out what charms he used? Just the fact that he made it passed the obstacles shows he must be rather skilled-”

“Fillius! Not now. Do we have any idea where he is, Albus? Or how to find him?”

“No, Pomona, I’m afraid not. We’ll just have to wait for him to decide to return to us.”

Severus Snape did not comment, but as he strode down an empty hall to the dungeons, he though ***If** he returns to us. It’s not as if we can assume-*

“He’ll be back.”

Snape spun around, and found himself looking at the Bloody Barron, floating in mid-air where an unfathomable expression.

“What?”

But the Barron didn’t answer, and seconds later he was gone.